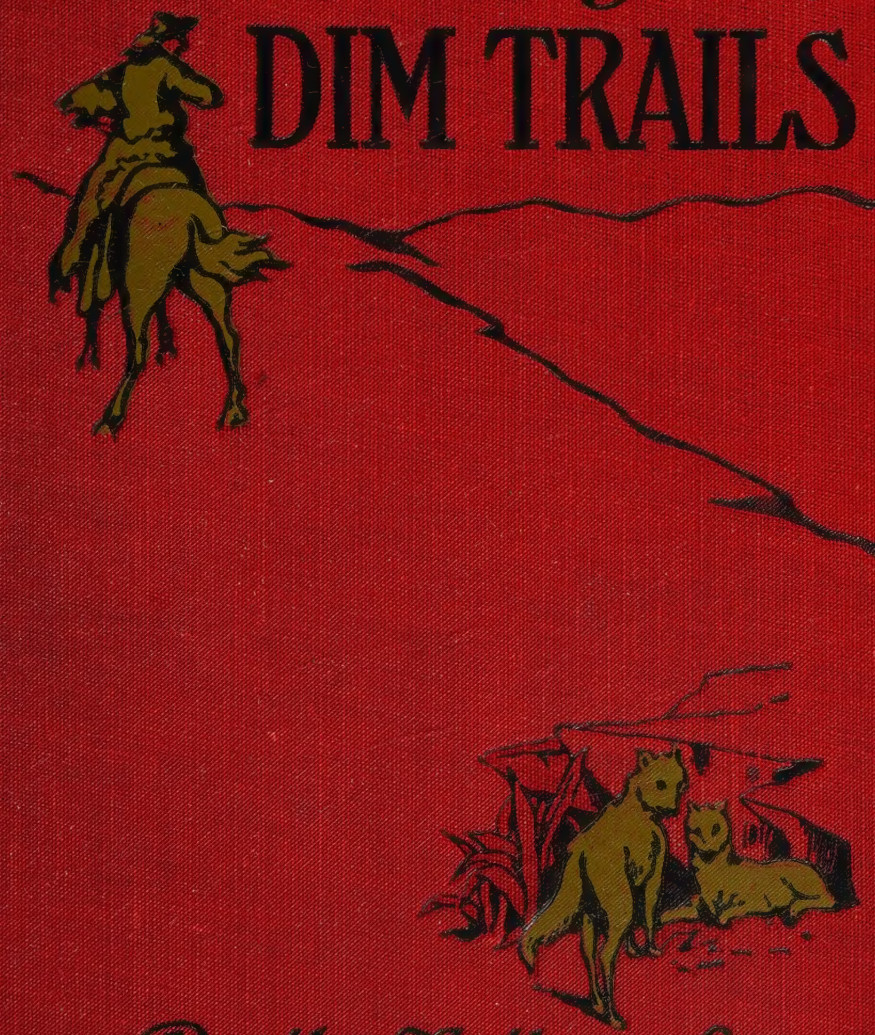
THE LURE of the DIM TRAILS



By the Author of
"CHIP OF THE FLYING U"

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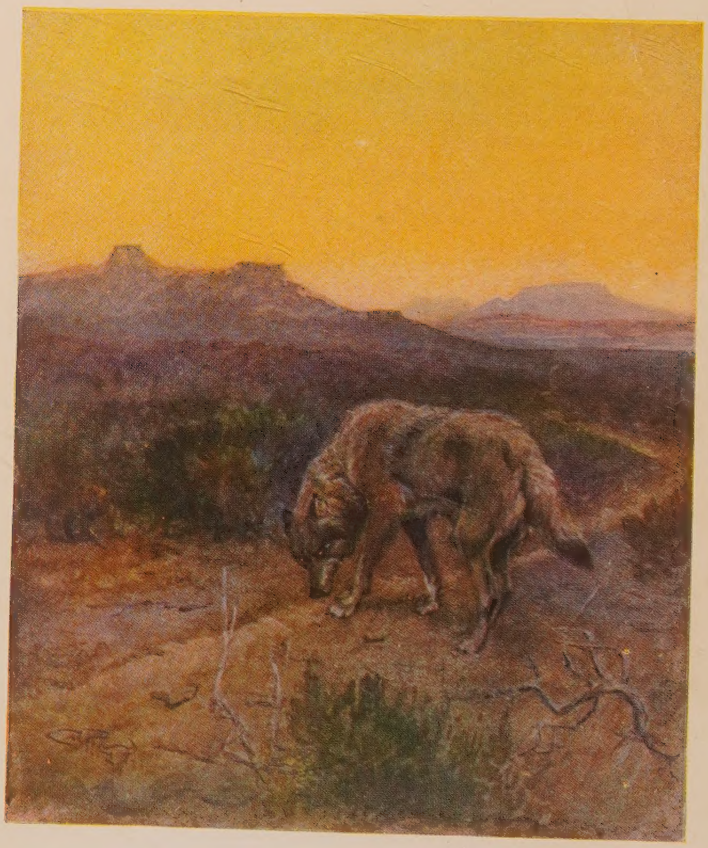

Out where the trails of men are dim and far apart.

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Frontispiece

The Lure of the Dim Trails

BY

B. M. BOWER

Author of "Chip of the Flying U," "The Range Dwellers," "Her Prairie Knight," etc.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. M. RUSSELL

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TO

THE MEN WHO HAVE FELT THE LURE

AND FOLLOWED

THE DIM TRAILS

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The Lure of the Dim Trails

CHAPTER I

IN SEARCH OF THE WESTERN TONE

HAT do you care, anyway?" asked Reeve-Howard philosophically. "It isn't as if you depended on the work for a living. Why worry over the fact that a mere pastime fails to be financially a success. You don't need to write——"

"Neither do you need to slave over those dry-point things," Thurston retorted, in none the best humor with his comforter. "You've an income bigger than mine; yet you toil over Grecian-

nosed women with untidy hair as if each one meant a meal and a bed——"

"A meal and a bed—that's good; you must think I live like a king."

"—And I notice you hate like the mischief to fail, even though——"

"Only I never have failed," put in Reeve-Howard, with the amused complacency born of much adulation.

Thurston kicked a foot-rest out of his way. "Well, I have. The fashion now is for swashbuckling tales with a haze of powder smoke rising to high heaven. The public taste runs to gore and more gore, and kidnappings of beautiful maidens—bah!"

"Follow the fashion then—if you *must* write. Get out of your pink tea and orchid atmosphere, and take your heroines out West—away out, beyond the Mississippi, and let them be kidnapped. Or New Mexico would do."

"New Mexico is also beyond the Mississippi, I believe," Thurston hinted.

"Perhaps it is. What I mean is, write what the public wants, since you don't relish failure. Why don't you do things about the plains? It ought to be easy, and you were born out there somewhere. It should come natural."

"I have," Thurston sighed. "My last rejection states that the local color is weak and unconvincing. Hang the local color!" The foot-rest suffered again.

Reeve-Howard was getting into his topcoat languidly, as he did everything else. "The thing to do, then," he drawled, "is to go out and study up on it. Get in touch with that country, and your local color will convince. Personally though, I like those little society skits you do——"

"Skits!" exploded Thurston. "My

last was a four-part serial. I never did a skit in my life."

"Beg pardon—which is more than you did after accusing my studies of having untidy hair. Don't look so glum, Phil. Go out and learn your West; a month or so will put you up to date—and by Jove! I half envy you the trip."

That is what put the idea into Thurston's head; and as Thurston's ideas generally bore fruit of one sort or another, he went out that very day and ordered from his tailor a complete riding outfit, and because he was a good customer the tailor consented to rush the work. It seemed to Thurston, looking over cuts of the very latest styles in riding clothes, that already he was breathing the atmosphere of the plains.

That night he stayed at home and dreamed of the West. His memory, coupled with what he had heard and

idealized by his imagination, conjured dim visions of what he had once known —had known and forgotten; of a land where men and conditions harked back to the raw foundations of civilization; where wide plains flecked with sage-brush and ribboned with faint, brown trails, spread away and away to a far sky-line. For Phil Thurston was range-born, if not range-bred. His father had chosen always to live out on the edge of things —out where the trails of men are dim and far apart—and the silent prairie bequeaths a heritage of distance-hunger to her sons.

While he brooded grew a keen longing to see again the little town huddled under the bare, brown hills that shut out the world; to see the gay-blanketed Indians who stole like painted shadows about the place, and the broad river always hurrying away to the sunrise. He

had been afraid of the river and of the bare hills and the Indians. He felt that his mother, also, had been afraid.

He pictured again—and the picture was blurred and indistinct—the day when strange men had brought his father mysteriously home; men who were silent save for the shuffling of their feet, and who carried their big hats awkwardly in their hands. There had been a day of hushed voices and much weeping and gloom, and he had been afraid to play. Then they had carried his father as mysteriously away again, and his mother had hugged him close and cried bitterly and long. The rest was blank. When one is only five, the present quickly blurs what is past, and he wondered that, after all these years, he should feel the grip of something very like homesickness—and for something more than half forgotten. But though he did not realize it, in his

veins flowed the adventurous blood of his father, and to it the dim trails were calling.

In four days he set his face eagerly toward the dun deserts and the sage-brush gray.

At Chicago a man took the upper berth in Thurston's section, and settled into the seat with a deep sigh—presumably of thankfulness. Thurston, with the quick eye of those who write, observed the whiteness of his ungloved hands, the coppery tan of cheeks and throat, the clear keenness of his eyes, and the four dimples in the crown of his soft, gray hat, and recognized him as a fine specimen of the Western type of farmer, returning home from the stockman's Mecca. After that he went calmly back to his magazine and forgot all about him.

Twenty miles out, the stranger leaned forward and tapped him lightly on the

knee. "Say, I hate to interrupt yuh," he began in a whimsical drawl, evidently characteristic of the man, "but I'd like to know where it is I've seen yuh before."

Thurston glanced up impersonally, hesitated between annoyance and a natural desire to be courteous, and replied that he had no memory of any previous meeting.

"Mebby not," admitted the other, and searched the face of Thurston with his keen eyes. It came to Phil that they were also a bit wistful, but he went unsympathetically back to his reading.

Five miles more and he touched Thurston again, apologetically yet insistently. "Say," he drawled, "ain't your name Thurston? I'll bet a carload uh steers it is—Bud Thurston. And your home range is Fort Benton."

Phil stared and confessed to all but the "Bud."

"That's what me and your dad always called yuh," the man asserted. "Well, I'll be hanged! But I knew it —I knew I'd run acrost yuh somewheres. You're the dead image uh your dad, Bill Thurston. And me and Bill freighted together from Whoop-up to Benton along in the seventies. Befor yuh was born we was chums. I don't reckon you'd remember me? Hank Graves, that used to pack yuh around on his back, and fill yuh up on dried prunes—when dried prunes was worth *money?* Yuh used to call 'em 'frumes,' and—Why, it was me with your dad when the Indians pot-shot him at Chimney Rock; and it was me helped your mother straighten things up so she could pull out, back where she come from. She never took to the West much. How is she? Dead? Too bad; she was a mighty fine woman, your mother was.

"Well, I'll—be—hanged! Bud Thurston—little, tow-headed Bud that used to holler for 'frumes' if he seen me coming a mile off. Doggone your measly hide, where's all them pink apurns yuh used to wear?" He leaned back and laughed—a silent, inner convulsion of pure gladness.

Philip Thurston was, generally speaking, a conservative young man and one slow to make friends; slower still to discard them. He was astonished to feel a choky sensation in his throat and a stinging of eyelids, and a leap in his blood. To be thus taken possession of by a blunt-speaking stranger not at all in his class; to be addressed as "Bud," and informed that he once devoured dried prunes; to be told "Doggone your measly hide" should have affronted him much. Instead, he seemed to be swept mysteriously back into the primitive past,

and to feel akin to this stranger with the drawl and the keen eyes. It was the blood of his father coming to its own.

From that hour the two were friends. Hank Graves, in his whimsical drawl, told Phil things about his father that made his blood tingle with pride; his father, whom he had almost forgotten, yet who had lived bravely his life, daring where other men quailed, going steadfastly upon his way, when other men hesitated.

So, borne swiftly into the West they talked, and the time seemed short. The train had long since been racing noisily over the silent prairies spread invitingly with tender green—great, lonely, inscrutable, luring men with a spell as sure and as strong as is the spell of the sea.

The train reeled across a trestle that spanned a deep, dry gash in the earth. In the green bottom huddled a cluster of

pygmy cattle and mounted men; farther down were two white flakes of tents, like huge snowflakes left unmelted in the green canyon.

"That's the Lazy Eight—my outfit," Graves informed Thurston with the unconscious pride of possession, pointing a forefinger as they whirled on. "I've got to get off, next station. Yuh want to remember, Bud, the Lazy Eight's your home from now on. We'll make a cow-puncher of yuh in no time; you've got it in yuh, or yuh wouldn't look so much like your dad. And you can write stories about us all yuh want—we won't kick. The way I've got the summer planned out, you'll waller chin-deep in material; all yuh got to do is foller the Lazy Eight through till shipping time."

Thurston had not intended learning to be a cow-puncher, or following the Lazy Eight or any other hieroglyphic through

till shipping time—whenever that was. But, facing Hank Graves, he had not the heart to tell him so, or that he had planned to spend only a month—or six weeks at most—in the West, gathering local color and perhaps a plot or two and a few types. Thurston was great on types.

The train slowed at a little station with a dismal red section house in the immediate background and a red-fronted saloon close beside. "Here we are," cried Graves, "and I ain't sorry; only I wisht you was going to stop right now. But I'll look for yuh in three or four days at the outside. So-long, Bud. Remember, the Lazy Eight's your hang-out."

CHAPTER II

LOCAL COLOR IN THE RAW

FOR the rest of the way Thurston watched the green hills slide by—and the greener hollows—and gave himself up to visions of Fort Benton; visions of creaking bull-trains crawling slowly, like giant brown worms, up and down the long hill; of many high-piled bales of buffalo hides upon the river bank, and clamorous little steamers churning up against the current; the Fort Benton that had, for many rushing miles, filled and colored the speech of Hank Graves and stimulated his childish half-memory.

But when he reached the place and wandered aimlessly about the streets, the vision faded into half-resentful realization that these things were no more forever. For the bull-trains, a roundup outfit clattered noisily out of town and disappeared in an elusive dust-cloud; for the gay-blanketed Indians slipping like painted shadows from view, stray cowboys galloped into town, slid from their saddles and clanked with dragging rowels into the nearest saloon, or the post-office. Between whiles the town cuddled luxuriously down in the deep little valley and slept while the river, undisturbed by pompous steamers, murmured a lullaby.

It was not the Fort Benton he had come far to see, so that on the second day he went away up the long hill that shut out the world and, until the east-bound train came from over the prairies,

paced the depot platform impatiently with never a vision to keep him company.

For a long time the gaze of Thurston clung fascinated to the wide prairie land, feeling again the stir in his blood. Then, when a deep cut shut from him the sight of the wilderness, he chanced to turn his head, and looked straight into the clear, blue-gray eyes of a girl across the aisle. Thurston considered himself immune from blue-gray—or any other—eyes, so that he permitted himself to regard her calmly and judicially, his mind reverting to the fact that he would need a heroine to be kidnapped, and wondering if she would do. She was a Western girl, he could tell that by the tan and by her various little departures from the Eastern styles—such as doing her hair low rather than high. Where he had been used to seeing the hair of woman piled high and skewered with many

pins, hers was brushed smoothly back—smoothly save for little, irresponsible waves here and there. Thurston decided that the style was becoming to her. He wondered if the fellow beside her were her brother; and then reminded himself sagely that brothers do not, as a rule, devote their time quite so assiduously to the entertainment of their sisters. He could not stare at her forever, and so he gave over his speculations and went back to the prairies.

Another hour, and Thurston was stifling a yawn when the coaches bumped sharply together and, with wheels screeching protest as the brakes clutched them, the train, grinding protest in every joint, came, with a final heavy jar, to a dead stop. Thurston thought it was a wreck, until out ahead came the sharp crackling of rifles. A passenger behind him leaned out of the window and a bullet

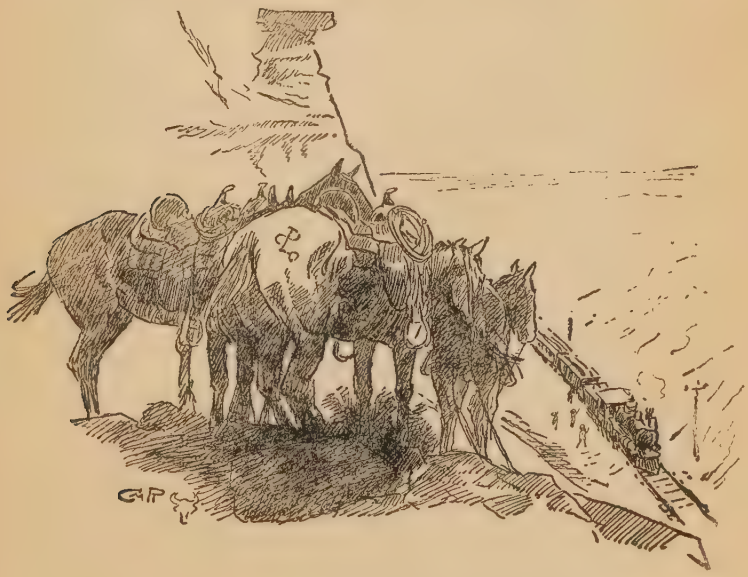
shattered the glass above his head; he drew back hastily.

Some one hurried through the front vestibule, the door was pushed unceremoniously open and a man—a giant, he seemed to Thurston—stopped just inside, glared down the length of the coach through slits in the black cloth over his face and bawled, "Hands *up!*"

Thurston was so utterly surprised that his hands jerked themselves involuntarily above his head, though he did not feel particularly frightened; he was filled with a stupefied sort of curiosity to know what would come next. The coach, so far as he could see, seemed filled with uplifted, trembling hands, so that he did not feel ashamed of his own. The man behind him put up his hands with the others—but one of them held a revolver that barked savagely and unexpectedly close against the ear of Thurston.

Thurston ducked. There was an echo from the front, and the man behind, who had risked so much on one shot, lurched into the aisle, swaying uncertainly between the seats. He of the mask fired again, viciously, and the other collapsed into a still, awkwardly huddled heap on the floor. The revolver dropped from his fingers and struck against Thurston's foot, making him wince.

Thurston had never before seen death come to a man, and the very suddenness of it unnerved him. All his faculties



were numbed before that terrible, pitiless form in the door, and the limp, dead body at his feet in the aisle. He did not even remember that here was the savage local color he had come far a-seeking. He quite forgot to improve the opportunity by making mental note of all the little, convincing details, as was his wont.

Presently he awoke to the realization of certain words spoken insistently close beside him. He turned his eyes and saw that the girl, her eyes staring straight before her, her slim, brown hands uplifted, was yet commanding him imperiously, her voice holding to that murmuring monotone more discreet than a whisper.

"The gun—drop down—and get it. He can't see to shoot—for the seat—in front. Get the gun. Get the gun!" was what she was saying.

Thurston looked at her helplessly, im-

ploringly. In truth, he had never fired a gun in all his peaceful life.

"The gun—get it—and shoot!" Her eyes moved quickly in a cautious, sidelong glance that commanded impatiently. Her straight eyebrows drew together imperiously. Then, when he met her eyes with that same helpless look, she said another word that hurt. It was "*Coward!*"

Thurston looked down at the gun, and at the huddled form. A tiny river of blood was creeping toward him. Already it had reached his foot, and his shoe was red along the sole. He moved his foot quickly away from it, and shuddered.

"Coward!" murmured the girl contemptuously again, and a splotch of anger showed under the tan of her cheek.

Thurston caught his breath and wondered if he could do it; he looked toward the door and thought how far it was to send a bullet straight when a man has

never, in all his life, fired a gun. And without looking he could see that horrible, red stream creeping toward him like some monster in a nightmare. His flesh crimpled with physical repulsion, but he meant to try; perhaps he could shoot the man in the mask, so that there would be another huddled, lifeless Thing on the floor, and another creeping red stream.

At that instant the tawny-haired young fellow beside the girl gathered himself for a spring, flung himself headlong before her and into the aisle; caught the dead man's pistol from the floor and fired, seemingly with one movement. Then he sprang up, still firing as fast as the trigger could move. From the door came answer, shot for shot, and the car was filled with the stifling odor of burnt powder. A woman screamed hysterically.

Then a puff of cool, prairie breeze came in through the shattered window behind Thurston, and the smoke-cloud lifted like a curtain blown upward in the wind. The tawny-haired young fellow was walking coolly down the aisle, the smoking revolver pointing like an accusing finger toward the outlaw who lay stretched upon his face, his fingers twitching.

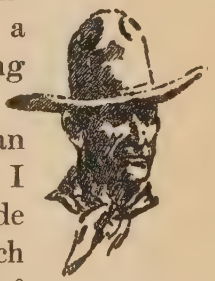
Outside, rifles were crackling like corn in a giant popper. Presently it slackened to an occasional shot. A brakeman, followed by two coatless mail-clerks with Winchesters, ran down the length of the train calling out that there was no danger. The thud of their running feet, and the wholesome mingling of their shouting struck sharply in the silence after the shooting. One of the men swung up on the steps of the day coach and came in.

"Hello, Park," he cried to the tawny-haired boy. "Got one, did yuh? That's good. We did, too—got him alive. Think uh the nerve uh that Wagner bunch! to go up against a train in broad daylight. Made an easy getaway, too, except the feller we gloomed in the express car. How's this one? Dead?"

"No. I reckon he'll get well enough to stretch a rope; he killed a man, in here." He motioned toward the huddled figure in the aisle. They came together, lifted the dead man and carried him away to the baggage car. A brakeman came with a cloth and wiped up the red pool, and Thurston pressed his lips tightly together and turned away his head; he could not remember when the sight of anything had made him so deathly sick. Once he glanced slyly at the girl opposite, and saw that she was very white under her tan, and that the

hands in her lap were clasped tightly and yet shook. But she met his eyes squarely, and Thurston did not look at her again; he did not like the expression of her mouth.

News of the holdup had been telegraphed ahead, and all Shellanne—which was not much of a crowd—gathered at the station to meet the train and congratulate the heroes. Thurston alighted almost shamefacedly into the midst of the loud-voiced commotion. While he was looking uncertainly about him, wondering where to go and what to do, a voice he knew hailed him with drawling welcome.



"Hello, Bud. Got back quicker than you expected, didn't yuh? It's lucky I happened to be in town—yuh can ride out with me. Say, yuh got quite a bunch uh local color for a story, didn't yuh? You'll be writing blood-and-thunder for

a month on the strength uh this little episode, I reckon." His twinkling eyes teased, though his face was quite serious, as was his voice.

She of the blue-gray eyes turned and measured Thurston with a deliberate, leisurely glance, and her mouth still had that unpleasant expression. Thurston colored guiltily, but Hank Graves lifted his hat and called her Mona, and asked her if she wasn't scared stiff, and if she were home to stay. Then he beckoned to the tawny-haired fellow with his finger, and winked at Mona—a proceeding which shocked Thurston considerably.

"Mona—here, hold on a minute, can't yuh? Mona, this is a friend uh mine; Bud Thurston's his name. He's come out to study us up and round up a bunch uh real Western atmosphere. He's a story-writer. I used to whack bulls all over the country with his father. Bud,

this is Mona Stevens; she ranges down close to the Lazy Eight, so the sooner yuh git acquainted, the quicker." He did not explain what would be the quicker, and Thurston's embarrassment was only aggravated by the introduction.

Miss Stevens gave him a chilly smile —the kind that is worse than none at all —and turned her back, thinly pretending that she heard her brother calling her —which she did not. Her brother was loudly explaining what would have happened if *he* had been on that train and had got a whack at the robbers, and his sister was far from his mind.

Graves slapped the shoulder of the fellow they had called Park. "You young devil, next time I leave the place for a week—yes, or overnight—I'll lock yuh up in the blacksmith shop. Have yuh got to be Mona's special escort, these days?"

"Wish I was," Park retorted, unmoved.

"Different here—yuh ain't much account, as it is. Bud, this here's my wagon-boss, Park Holloway; one of 'em, that is. I'm going to turn yuh over to him and let him wise yuh up. Say, you young bucks ought to get along together pretty smooth. Your dads run buffalo together before either of yuh was born. Well, let's be moving—we ain't home yet. Got a war-bag, Bud?"

Late that night Thurston lay upon a home-made bed and listened to the frogs croaking monotonously in the hollow behind the house, and to the lone coyote which harped upon the subject of his wrongs away on a distant hillside, and to the subdued snoring of Hank Graves in the room beyond. He was trying to adjust himself to this new condition of

things, and the new condition refused utterly to be measured by his accepted standard.

According to that standard, he should feel repulsed and annoyed by the familiarity of strangers who persisted in calling him "Bud" without taking the trouble to find out whether or not he liked it. And what puzzled Thurston and put him all at sea was the consciousness that he did like it, and that it struck familiarly upon his ears as something to which he had been accustomed in the past.

Also, according to his well-ordered past, he should hate this raw life and rawer country where could occur such brutal things as he had that day witnessed. He should dislike a man like Park Holloway who, having wounded a man unto death, had calmly dismissed the subject with the regret that his aim

had not been better, so that he could have saved the county the expense of trying and hanging the fellow. Thurston was amazed to find that, down in the inner man of him, he admired Park Holloway exceedingly, and privately resolved to perfect himself in the use of fire-arms —he who had been wont to deplore the thinly veneered savagery of men who liked such things.

After much speculation he decided that Mona Stevens would not do for a kidnapped heroine. He could not seem to " see " her in such a position, and, besides, he told himself that such a type of girl did not attract him at all. She had called him a coward—and why? simply because he, straight from the trammels of civilization, had not been prepared to meet the situation thrust upon him—which *she* had thrust upon him. She had demanded of him something he had not

the power to accomplish, and she had called him a coward. And in his heart Thurston knew that it was unjust, and that he was not a coward.

CHAPTER III

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

HURSTON, dressed immaculately in riding clothes of the latest English cut, went airily down the stairs and discovered that he was not early, as he had imagined. Seven o'clock, he had told himself proudly, was not bad for a beginner; and he had smiled in anticipation of Hank Graves' surprise—which was fortunate, since he would otherwise have been cheated of smiling at all. For Hank Graves, he learned from the cook, had eaten breakfast at five and had left the ranch more than an hour be-

before; the men also were scattered to their work.

Properly humbled in spirit, he sat down to the kitchen table and ate his belated breakfast, while the cook kneaded bread at the other end of the same table and eyed Thurston with frank amusement. Thurston had never before been conscious of feeling ill at ease in the presence of a servant, and hurried through the meal so that he could escape into the clear sunshine, feeling a bit foolish in the unaccustomed bagginess of his riding breeches and the snugness of his leggings; for he had never taken to outdoor sports, except as an onlooker from the shade of a grand stand or piazza.

While he was debating the wisdom of writing a detailed description of yesterday's tragedy while it was still fresh in his mind and stowing it away for future "color," Park Holloway rode into the

yard and on to the stables. He nodded at Thurston and grinned without apparent cause, as the cook had done. Thurston followed him to the corral and watched him pull the saddle off his horse, and throw it carelessly to one side. It looked cumbersome—that saddle; quite unlike the ones he had inspected in the New York shops. He grasped the horn, lifted upon it and said, "Jove!"

"Heavy, ain't it?" Park laughed, and slipped the bridle down over the ears of his horse and dismissed him with a slap on the rump. "Don't yuh like the looks of it?" he added indulgently.

Thurston, engaged in wondering what all those little strings were for, felt the indulgence and straightened. "How should I know?" he retorted. "Anyone can see that my ignorance is absolute. I expect you to laugh at me, Mr. Holloway."

"Call me Park," said he of the tawny hair, and leaned against the fence looking extremely boyish and utterly incapable of walking calmly down upon a barking revolver and shooting as he went. "You're bound to learn all about saddles and what they're made for," he went on. "So long as yuh don't get swell-headed the first time yuh stick on a horse that side-steps a little, or back down from a few hard knocks, you'll be all right."

Thurston had not intended getting out and actually living the life he had come to observe, but something got in his nerves and his blood and bred an impulse to which he yielded without reserve. "Park, see here," he said eagerly. "Graves said he'd turn me over to you, so you could—er—teach me wisdom. It's deuced rough on you, but I hope you won't refuse to be bothered with me.

I want to learn—everything. And I want you to find fault like the mischief, and—er—knock me into shape, if it's possible." He was very modest over his ignorance, and his voice rang true.

Park studied him gravely. "Bud," he said at last, "you'll do. You're greener right now than a blue-joint meadow in June, but yuh got the right stuff in yuh, and it's a go with me. You come along with us after that trail-herd, and you'll get knocked into shape fast enough. Smoke?"

Thurston shook his head. "Not those."

"I dunno—I'm afraid yuh can't be the real thing unless yuh fan your lungs with cigarette smoke regular." The twinkle belied him, though. "Say, where did you pick them bloomers?"

"They were made in New York." Thurston smiled in sickly fashion. He

had all along been uncomfortably aware of the sharp contrast between his own modish attire and the somewhat disreputable leathern chaps of his host's foreman.

"Well," commented Park, "you told me to find fault like the mischief, and I'm going to call your bluff. This here's Montana, recollect, and I raise the long howl over them habiliments. The best thing you can do is pace along to the house and discard before the boys get sight of yuh. They'd queer yuh with the whole outfit, sure. Uh course," he went on soothingly when he saw the resentment in Thurston's eyes, "I expect they're real stylish—back East—but the boys ain't educated to stand for anything like that; they'd likely tell yuh they set like the hide on the hind legs of an elephant—which is a fact. I hate to say it, Kid, but they sure do look like the devil."

"So would you—in New York," Thurston flung back at him.

"Why, sure. But this ain't New York; this here's the Lazy Eight corral, and I'm doing yuh a favor. You wouldn't like to have the boys shooting holes through the slack, would yuh? You amble right along and get some pants on—and when you've wised up some you'll thank me a lot. I'm going on a little jaunt down the creek, before dinner, and you might go along; you'll need to get hardened to the saddle anyway, before we start for Billings, or you'll do most uh riding on the mess-wagon."

Thurston, albeit in resentful mood, went meekly and did as he was commanded to do; and no man save Park and the cook ever glimpsed those smart riding clothes of English cut.

"Now yuh look a heap more human,"

was the way Park signified his approval of the change. "Here's a little horse that's easy to ride and dead gentle if yuh don't spur him in the neck, which you ain't liable to do at present; and Hank says you can have this saddle for keeps. Hank used to ride it, but he outgrowed it and got one longer in the seat. When we start for Billings to trail up them cattle, of course you'll get a string of your own to ride."

"A string? I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"Yuh don't savvy riding a string? A string, m'son, is ten or a dozen saddle-horses that yuh ride turn about, and nobody else has got any right to top one; every fellow has got his own string, yuh see."

Thurston eyed his horse distrustfully. "I think," he ventured, "one will be enough for me. I'll scarcely need a

dozen." The truth was that he thought Park was laughing at him.

Park slid sidewise in the saddle and proceeded to roll another cigarette. "I'd be willing to bet that by fall you'll have a good-sized string rode down to a whisper. You wait; wait till it gets in your blood. Why, I'd die if you took me off the range. Wait till yuh set out in the dark, on your horse, and count the stars and watch the big dipper swing around towards morning, and listen to the cattle breathing close by—sleeping while you ride around 'em playing guardian angel over their dreams. Wait till yuh get up at daybreak and are in the saddle with the pink uh sunrise, and know you'll sleep fifteen or twenty miles from there that night; and yuh lay down at night with the smell of new grass in your nostrils where your bed had bruised it. Why, Bud, if you're a man, you'll be

plumb spoiled for your little old East." Then he swung back his feet and the horses broke into a lope which jarred the unaccustomed frame of Thurston mightily, though he kept the pace doggedly.

"I've got to go down to the Stevens place," Park informed him. "You met Mona yesterday—it was her come down on the train with me, yuh remember." Thurston did remember very distinctly. "Hank says yuh compose stories. Is that right?"

Thurston's mind came back from wondering how Mona Stevens' mouth looked when she was pleased with one, and he nodded.

"Well, there's a lot in this country that ain't ever been wrote about, I guess; at least if it was I never read it, and I read considerable. But the trouble is, them that know ain't in the writing busi-

ness, and them that write don't *know*. The way I've figured it, they set back East somewhere and write it like they think maybe it is; and it's a hell of a job they make of it."

Thurston, remembering the time when he, too, "set back East" and wrote it like he thought maybe it was, blushed guiltily. He was thankful that his stories of the West had, without exception, been rejected as of little worth. He shuddered to think of one of them falling into the hands of Park Holloway.

"I came out to learn, and I want to learn it thoroughly," he said, in the face of much physical discomfort. Just then the horses slowed for a climb, and he breathed thanks. "In the first place," he began again when he had readjusted himself carefully in the saddle, "I wish you'd tell me just where you are going

with the wagons, and what you mean by trailing a herd."

"Why, I thought I said we were going to Billings," Park answered, surprised. "What we're going to do when we get there is to receive a shipment of cattle—young steers—that's coming up from the Panhandle—which is a part uh Texas. And we trail 'em up here and turn 'em loose this side the river. After that we'll start the calf roundup. The Lazy Eight runs two wagons, yuh know. I run one, and Deacon Smith runs the other; we work together, though, most uh the time. It makes quite a crew—twenty-five or thirty men."

"I didn't know," said Thurston dubiously, "that you ever shipped cattle into this country. I supposed you shipped them out. Is Mr. Graves buying some?"

"Hank? I guess yes! six thousand head uh yearlings and two-year-olds, this

spring; some seasons it's more. We get in young stock every year and turn 'em loose on the range till they're ready to ship. It's cheaper than raising calves, yuh know. When yuh get to Billings, Bud, you'll see some cattle! Why, our bunch alone will make seven trains, and that ain't a commencement. Cattle's cheap down South, this year, and seems like everybody's buying. Hank didn't buy as much as some, because he runs quite a bunch uh cows; we'll brand six or seven thousand calves this spring. Hank sure knows how to rake in the coin."

Thurston agreed as politely as he could for the jolting. They had again struck the level and seven miles, at Park's usual pace, was heartbreaking to a man not accustomed to the saddle. Thurston had written, just before leaving home, a musical bit of verse born of his luring

dreams, about "the joy of speeding fleetly where the grass-land meets the sky," and he was gritting his teeth now over the idiotic lines.

When they reached the ranch and Mona's mother came to the door and invited them in, he declined almost rudely, for he had a feeling that once out of the saddle he would have difficulty in getting into it again. Besides, Mona was not at home, according to her mother.

So they did not tarry, and Thurston reached the Lazy Eight alive, but with the glamour quite gone from his West. If he had not been the son of his father, he would have taken the first train which pointed its nose to the East, and he would never again have essayed the writing of Western stories or musical verse which sung the joys of galloping blithely off to the sky-line. He had just been galloping off to a sky-line that was always just be-

fore—and he had not been blithe; nor did the memory of it charm. Of a truth, the very thought of things Western made him swear mild, city-bred oaths.

He choked back his awe of the cook and asked him, quite humbly, what was good to take the soreness from one's muscles; afterward he had crept painfully up the stairs, clasping to his bosom a beer bottle filled with pungent, home-made liniment which the cook had gravely declared "out uh sight for saddle-galls."

Hank Graves, when he heard the story —with artistic touches—from the cook, slapped his thigh and laughed one of his soundless chuckles. "The son-of-a-gun! He's the right stuff. Never whined, eh? I knew it. He's his dad over agin, from the ground up." And loved him the better.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRAIL-HERD

THURSTON tucked the bulb of his camera down beside the bellows and closed the box with a snap. "I wonder what old Reeve would say to that view," he mused aloud.

"Old who?"

"Oh, a fellow back in New York. Jove! he'd throw up his dry-point heads and take to oils and landscapes if he could see this."

The "this" was a panoramic view of the town and surrounding valley of Billings. The day was sunlit and still, and far objects stood up with sharp outlines

in the clear atmosphere. Here and there the white tents of waiting trail-outfits splotched the bright green of the prairie. Horsemen galloped to and from the town at top speed, and a long, grimy red stock train had just snorted out on a siding by the stockyards where the bellowing of thirsty cattle came faintly like the roar of pounding surf in the distance.

Thurston—quite a different Thurston from the trim, pale young man who had followed the lure of the West two weeks before—drew a long breath and looked out over the hurrying waters of the Yellowstone. It was good to be alive and young, and to live the tented life of the plains; it was good even to be "speeding fleetly where the grass-land meets the sky"—for two weeks in the saddle had changed considerably his view-point. He turned again to the dust and roar of the stockyards a mile or so away.

"Perhaps," he remarked hopefully, "the next train will be ours." Strange how soon a man may identify himself with new conditions and new aims. He had come West to look upon the life from the outside, and now his chief thought was of the coming steers, which he referred to unblushingly as "our cattle." Such is the spell of the range.

"Let's ride on over, Bud," Park proposed. "That's likely the Circle Bar shipment. Their bunch comes from the same place ours does, and I want to see how they stack up."

Thurston agreed and went to saddle up. He had mastered the art of saddling and could, on lucky days and when he was in what he called "form," rope the horse he wanted; to say nothing of the times when his loop settled unexpectedly over the wrong victim. Park Holloway, for in-

stance, who once got it neatly under his chin, much to his disgust and the astonishment of Thurston.

"I'm going to take my kodak," said he. "I like to watch them unload, and I can get some good pictures, with this sunlight."

"When you've hollered 'em up and down the chutes as many times as I have," Park told him, "yuh won't need no pictures to help yuh remember what it's like."

It was an old story with Park, and Thurston's enthusiasm struck him as a bit funny. He perched upon a corner of the fence out of the way, and smoked cigarettes while he watched the cattle and shouted pleasantries to the men who prodded and swore and gesticulated at the wild-eyed huddle in the pens. Soon his turn would come, but just now he was content to look on and take his ease.

"For the life of me," cried Thurston, sidling gingerly over to him, "I can't see where they all come from. For two days these yards have never been empty. The country will soon be one vast herd."

"Two days—huh! this thing'll go on for weeks, m'son. And after all is over, you'll wonder where the dickens they all went to. Montana is some bigger than you realize, I guess. And next fall, when shipping starts, you'll think you're seeing raw porterhouse steaks for the whole world. Let's drift out uh this dust; you'll have time to get a carload uh pictures before our bunch rolls in."

As a matter of fact, it was two weeks before the Lazy Eight consignment arrived. Thurston haunted the stockyards with his kodak, but after the first two or three days he took no pictures. For every day was but a repetition of those that had gone before: a great, grimy

engine shunting cars back and forth on the siding; an endless stream of weary, young cattle flowing down the steep chutes into the pens, from the pens to the branding chutes, where they were burned deep with the mark of their new owners; then out through the great gate, crowding, pushing, wild to flee from restraint, yet held in and guided by mounted cowboys; out upon the green prairie where they could feast once more upon sweet grasses and drink their fill from the river of clear, mountain water; out upon the weary march of the trail, on and on for long days until some boundary which their drivers hailed with joy was passed, and they were free at last to roam at will over the wind-brushed range-land; to lie down in some cool, sweet-scented swale and chew their cuds in peace.

Two weeks, and then came a telegram

for Park. In the reading of it he shuffled off his attitude of boyish irresponsibility and became in a breath the cool, business-like leader of men. Holding the envelope still in his hand he sought out Thurston, who was practising with a rope. As Park approached him he whirled the noose and cast it neatly over the peak of the night-hawk's teepee.

"Good shot," Park encouraged, "but I'd advise yuh to take another target. You'll have the tent down over Scotty's ears, and then you'll think yuh stirred up a mess uh hornets.

"Say, Bud, our cattle are coming, and I'm going to be short uh men. If you'd like a job I'll take yuh on, and take chances on licking yuh into shape. Maybe the wages won't appeal to yuh, but I'm willing to throw in heaps uh valuable experience that won't cost yuh a cent." He

lowered an eyelid toward the cook-tent, although no one was visible.

Thurston studied the matter while he coiled his rope, and no longer. Secretly he had wanted all along to be a part of the life instead of an onlooker. "I'll take the job, Park—if you think I can hold it down." The speech would doubtless have astonished Reeve-Howard in more ways than one; but Reeve-Howard was already a part of the past in Thurston's mind. He was for living the present.

"Well," Park retorted, "it'll be your own funeral if yuh get fired. Better stake yourself to a pair uh chaps; you'll need 'em on the trip."

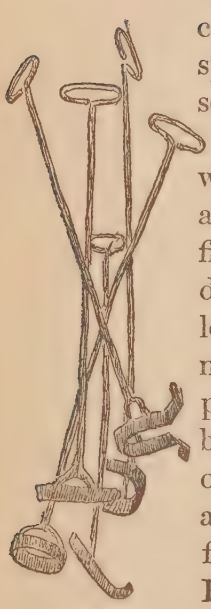
"Also a large, rainbow-hued silk handkerchief if I want to look the part," Thurston bantered.

"If yuh don't want your darned neck blistered, yuh mean," Park flung over his

shoulders. "Your wages and schooling start in to-morrow at sunup."

It was early in the morning when the first train arrived, hungry, thirsty, tired, bawling a general protest against fate and man's mode of travel. Thurston, with a long pole in his hand, stood on the narrow plank near the top of a chute wall and prodded vaguely at an endless, moving incline of backs. Incidentally he took his cue from his neighbors, and shouted till his voice was a croak—though he could not see that he accomplished anything either by his prodding or his shouting.

Below him surged the sea of hide and horns which was barely suggestive of the animals as individuals. Out in the corrals the dust-cloud hung low, just as it had hovered every day for more than two weeks; just as it would hover every day for two weeks longer. Across the yards



near the big, outer gate Deacon Smith's crew was already beginning to brand. The first train was barely unloaded when the second trailed in and out on the siding; and so the third came also. Then came a lull, for the consignment had been split in two and the second section was several hours behind the first.

Thurston rode out to camp, aching with the strain and ravenously hungry, after toiling with his muscles for the first time in his life; for his had been days of physical ease. He had yet to learn the art of working so that every movement counted something accomplished, as did the others; besides, he had been in constant fear of losing his hold on the fence and plunging headlong amongst the trampling hoofs below, a fate that he shuddered to contemplate. He did not, however, mention that fear, or his muscle-ache, to any man; he might

be green, but he was not the man to whine.

When he went back into the dust and roar, Park ordered him curtly to tend the branding fire, since both crews would brand that afternoon and get the corrals cleared for the next shipment. Thurston thanked Park mentally; tending branding-fire sounded very much like child's play.

Soon the gray dust-cloud took on a shade of blue in places where the smoke from the fires cut through; a new tang smote the nostrils: the rank odor of burning hair and searing hides; a new note crept into the clamoring roar: the low-keyed blat of pain and fright.

Thurston turned away his head from the sight and the smell, and piled on wood until Park stopped him with: " Say, Bud, we ain't celebrating any election! It ain't a bonfire we want, it's heat; just keep

her going and save wood all yuh can."

After an hour of fire-tending Thurston decided that there were things more wearisome than "hollering 'em down the chutes." His eyes were smarting intolerably with smoke and heat, and the smell of the branding was not nice; but through the long afternoon he stuck to the work, shrewdly guessing that the others were not having any fun either. Park and "the Deacon" worked as hard as any, branding the steers as they were squeezed, one by one, fast in the little branding chutes. The setting sun shone redly through the smoke before Thurston was free to kick the half-burnt sticks apart and pour water upon them as directed by Park.

"Think yuh earned your little old dollar-and-thirty-three cents, Bud?" Park asked him. And Thurston smiled a tired, sooty smile that seemed all teeth.

"I hope so; at any rate, I have a deep, inner knowledge of the joys of branding cattle."

"Wait till yuh burn Lazy Eights on wriggling, blatting calves for two or three hours at a stretch before yuh talk about the joys uh branding." Park rubbed eloquently his aching biceps.

At dusk Thurston crept into his blankets, feeling that he would like the night to be at least thirty-six hours long. He was just settling into a luxurious, leather-upholstered dream chair preparatory to telling Reeve-Howard his Western experiences when Park's voice bellowed into the tent:

"Roll out, boys—we got a train pulling in!"

There was hurried dressing in the dark of the bed-tent, hasty mounting, and a hastier ride through the cool night air. There were long hours at the chutes,

prodding down at a wavering line of moving shadows, while the "big dipper" hung bright in the sky and lighted lanterns bobbed back and forth along the train waving signals to one another. At intervals Park's voice cut crisply through the turmoil, giving orders to men whom he could not see.

The east was lightening to a pale yellow when the men climbed at last into their saddles and galloped out to camp for a hurried breakfast. Thurston had been comforting his aching body with the promise of rest and sleep; but three thousand cattle were milling impatiently in the stockyards, so presently he found himself fanning a sickly

little blaze with his hat while he endeavored to keep the smoke from his tired eyes. Of a truth, Reeve-Howard would have stared mightily at sight of him.

Once Park, passing by, smiled down upon him grimly. "Here's where yuh get the real thing in local color," he taunted, but Thurston was too busy to answer. The stress of living had dimmed his eye for the picturesque.

That night, one Philip Thurston slept as sleeps the dead. But he awoke with the others and thanked the Lord there were no more cattle to unload and brand.

When he went out on day-herd that afternoon he fancied that he was getting into the midst of things and taking his place with the veterans. He would have been filled with resentment had he suspected the truth: that Park carefully eased those first days of his novitiate. That was why none of the night-guarding fell to him until they had left Billings many miles behind them.

CHAPTER V

THE STORM

HE third night he was detailed to stand with Bob MacGregor on the middle guard, which lasts from eleven o'clock until two. The outfit had camped near the head of a long, shallow basin that had a creek running through; down the winding banks of it lay the white-tented camps of seven other trail-herds, the cattle making great brown blotches against the green at sundown. Thurston hoped they would all be there in the morning when the sun came up, so that he could get a picture.

"Aw, they'll be miles away by then," Bob assured him unfeelingly. "By the signs, you can take snap-shots by lightning in another hour. Got your slicker, Bud?"

Thurston said he hadn't, and Bob shook his head prophetically. "You'll sure wish yuh had it before yuh hit camp again; when yuh get wise, you'll ride with your slicker behind the cantle, rain or shine. They'll need singing to, to-night."

Thurston prudently kept silent, since he knew nothing whatever about it, and Bob gave him minute directions about riding his rounds, and how to turn a stray animal back into the herd without disturbing the others.

The man they relieved met them silently and rode away to camp. Off to the right an animal coughed, and a black shape moved out from the shadows.

Bob swung towards it, and the shape melted again into the splotch of shade which was the sleeping herd. He motioned to the left. "Yuh can go that way; and yuh want to sing something, or whistle, so they'll know what yuh are." His tone was subdued, as it had not been before. He seemed to drift away into the darkness, and soon his voice rose, away across the herd, singing. As he drew nearer Thurston caught the words —at first disjointed and indistinct, then plainer as they met. It was a song he had never heard before, because its first popularity had swept far below his social plane.

She's o-only a bird in a gil-ded cage,
A beautiful sight to see-e-e;
You may think she seems ha-a-aappy and free from
ca-a-re

The singer passed on and away, and only the high notes floated across to

Thurston, who whistled softly under his breath while he listened. Then, as they neared again on the second round, the words came pensively:

> Her beauty was so-o-old
> For an old man's go-o-old,
> She's a bird in a gil-ded ca-a-age.

Thurston rode slowly like one in a dream, and the lure of the range-land was strong upon him. The deep breathing of three thousand sleeping cattle; the strong, animal odor; the black night which grew each moment blacker, and the rhythmic ebb and flow of the clear, untrained voice of a cowboy singing to his charge. If he could put it into words; if he could but picture the broody stillness, with frogs *cr-ekk, cr*-ekking along the reedy creek-bank and a coyote yapping weirdly upon a distant hilltop! From the southwest came mutterings

half-defiant and ominous. A breeze whispered something to the grasses as it crept away down the valley.

> I stood in a church-yard just at ee-eve,
> While the sunset ador-ned the west

It was Bob, drawing close out of the night. "You're doing fine, Kid; keep her a-going," he commended, in an undertone as he passed, and Thurston moistened his unaccustomed lips and began industriously whistling "The Heart Bowed Down," and from that jumped to *Faust*. Fifteen minutes exhausted his memory of the whistleable parts, and he was not given to tiresome repetitions. He stopped for a moment, and Bob's voice chanted admonishingly from somewhere, "Keep her a-go-o-ing, Bud, old boy!" So Thurston took breath and began on "The Holy City," and came near laughing at the incongruity of the

song; only he remembered that he must not frighten the cattle, and checked the impulse.

"Say," Bob began when he came near enough, "do yuh know the words uh that piece? It's a peach; I wisht you'd sing it." He rode on, still humming the woes of the lady who married for gold.

Thurston obeyed while the high-piled thunder-heads rumbled deep accompaniment, like the resonant lower tones of a bass viol.

Last night I lay a-sleeping, there came a dream so fair;
I stood in old Jerusalem, beside the temple there

A steer stepped restlessly out of the herd, and Thurston's horse, trained to the work, of his own accord turned him gently back.

I heard the children singing; and ever as they sang,
Methought the voice of angels from heaven in answer rang.

From the west the thunder boomed, drowning the words in its deep-throated growl.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, lift up your gates and sing

"Hit her up a little faster, Bud, or we'll lose some. They're getting on their feet with that thunder."

Sunfish, in answer to Thurston's touch on the reins, quickened to a trot. The joggling was not conducive to the best vocal expression, but the singer persevered:

Hosanna in the *high*-est,
Hosanna to your King!

Flash! the lightning cut through the storm-clouds, and Bob, who had contented himself with a subdued whistling while he listened, took up the refrain:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem

It was as if a battery of heavy field

pieces boomed overhead. The entire herd was on its feet and stood close-huddled, their tails to the coming storm. Now the horses were loping steadily in their endless circling—a pace they could hold for hours if need be. For one blinding instant Thurston saw far down the valley; then the black curtain dropped as suddenly as it had lifted.

"Keep a-hollering, Bud!" came the command, and after it Bob's voice trilled high above the thunder-growl:

> Hosanna in the *high*-est,
> Hosanna to your King!

A strange thrill of excitement came to Thurston. It was all new to him; for his life had been sheltered from the rages of nature. He had never before been out under the night sky when it was threatening as now. He flinched when came an ear-splitting crash that once

again lifted the black curtain and showed him, white-lighted, the plain. In the dark that followed came a rhythmic thud of hoofs far up the creek, and the rattle of living castanets. Sunfish threw up his head and listened, muscles a-quiver.

"There's a bunch a-running," called Bob from across the frightened herd. "If they hit us, give Sunfish his head —he's been there before—and *keep on the outside!*"

Thurston yelled "All right!" but the pounding roar of the stampede drowned his voice. A whirlwind of frenzied steers bore down upon him—twenty-five hundred Panhandle two-year-olds, though he did not know it then. His mind was all a daze, with one sentence zig-zagging through it like the lightning over his head, "Give Sunfish his head, and keep on the outside!'

That was what saved him, for he had

the sense to obey. After a few minutes of breathless racing, with a roar as of breakers in his ears and the crackle of clashing horns and the gleaming of rolling eyeballs close upon his horse's heels, he found himself washed high and dry, as it were, while the tumult swept by. Presently he was galloping along behind and wondering dully how he got there, though perhaps Sunfish knew well enough.

In his story of the West—the one that had failed to be convincing—he had in his ignorance described a stampede, and it had not been in the least like this one. He blushed at the memory, and wondered if he should ever again feel qualified to write of these things.

Great drops of rain pounded him on the back as he rode—chill drops, that went to the skin. He thought of his new canary-colored slicker in the bed-

tent, and before he knew it swore just as any of the other men would have done under similar provocation; it was the first real, able-bodied oath he had ever uttered. He was becoming assimilated with the raw conditions of life.

He heard a man's voice calling to him, and distinguished the dim shape of a rider close by. He shouted that password of the range, "Hello!"

"What outfit is this?" the man cried again.

"The Lazy Eight!" snapped Thurston, sure that the other had come with the stampede. Then, feeling the anger of temporary authority, "What in hell are you up to, letting your cattle run?" If Park could have heard him say that —or Reeve-Howard!

Down the long length of the valley they swept, gathering to themselves other herds and other riders as incensed as

were themselves. It is not pretty work, nor amusing, to gallop madly in the wake of a stampede at night, keeping up the stragglers and taking the chance of a broken neck with the rain to make matters worse.

Bob MacGregor sought Thurston with much shouting, and having found him they rode side by side. And always the thunder boomed overhead, and by the lightning flashes they glimpsed the turbulent sea of cattle fleeing, they knew not where or why, with blind fear crowding their heels.

The noise of it roused the camps as they thundered by; men rose up, peered out from bed-tents as the stampede swept past, cursed the delay it would probably make, hoped none of the boys got hurt, and thanked the Lord the tents were pitched close to the creek and out of the track of the maddened herds.

Then they went back to bed to wait philosophically for daylight.

When Sunfish, between flashes, stumbled into a shallow washout, and sent Thurston sailing unbeautifully over his head, Bob pulled up and slid off his horse in a hurry.

"Yuh hurt, Bud?" he cried anxiously, bending over him. For Thurston, from the very frankness of his verdant ignorance, had won for himself the indulgent protectiveness of the whole outfit; not a man but watched unobtrusively over his welfare—and Bob MacGregor went farther and loved him whole-heartedly. His voice, when he spoke, was unequivocally frightened.

Thurston sat up and wiped a handful of mud off his face; if it had not been so dark Bob would have shouted at the

spectacle. "I'm 'kinda sorter shuck up like,'" he quoted ruefully. "And my nose is skinned, thank you. Where's that devil of a horse?"

Bob stood over him and grinned. "My, I'm surprised at yuh, Bud! What would your Sunday-school teacher say if she heard yuh? Anyway, yuh ain't got any call to cuss Sunfish; he ain't to blame. He's used to fellows that can ride."

"Shut up!" Thurston commanded inelegantly. "I'd like to see you ride a horse when he's upside down!"

"Aw, come on," urged Bob, giving up the argument. "We'll be plumb lost from the herd if we don't hustle."

They got into their saddles again and went on, riding by sound and the rare glimpses the lightning gave them as it flared through the storm away to the east.

"Wet?" Bob sung out sympathetic-

ally from the streaming shelter of his slicker. Thurston, wriggling away from his soaked clothing, grunted a sarcastic negative.

The cattle were drifting now before the storm which had settled to a monotonous downpour. The riders—two or three men for every herd that had joined in the panic—circled, a veritable picket line without the password. There would be no relief ride out to them that night, and they knew it and settled to the long wait for morning.

Thurston took up his station next to Bob; rode until he met the next man, and then retraced his steps till he faced Bob again; rode until the world seemed unreal and far away, with nothing left but the night and the riding back and forth on his beat, and the rain that oozed through his clothes and trickled uncomfortably down inside his collar. He lost all count

of time, and was startled when at last came gray dawn.

As the light grew brighter his eyes widened and forgot their sleep-hunger; he had not thought it would be like this. He was riding part way across one end of a herd larger than his imagination had ever pictured; three thousand cattle had seemed to him a multitude—yet here were more than twenty thousand, wet, draggled, their backs humped miserably from the rain which but a half hour since had ceased. He was still gazing and wondering when Park rode up to him.

"Lord! Bud, you're a sight! Did the bunch walk over yuh?" he greeted.

"No, only Sunfish," snapped Thurston crossly. Time was when Philip Thurston would not have answered any man abruptly, however great the provocation. He was only lately getting down to the real, elemental man of him; to the

son of Bill Thurston, bull-whacker, prospector, follower of dim trails. He rode silently back to camp with Bob; ate his breakfast, got into dry clothes and went out and tied his slicker deliberately and securely behind the cantle of his saddle, though the sun was shining straight into his eyes and the sky fairly twinkled, it was so clean of clouds.

Bob watched him with eyes that laughed. "My, you're an ambitious son-of-a-gun," he chuckled. "And you've got the slicker question settled in your mind, I see; yuh learn easy; it takes two or three soakings to learn some folks."

"We've got to go back and help with the herd, haven't we?" Thurston asked. "The horses are all out."

"Yep. They'll stay out, too, till noon, m'son. We hike to bed, if anybody should ask yuh."

So it was not till after dinner that he

rode back to the great herd—with his kodak in his pocket—to find the cattle split up into several bunches. The riders at once went to work separating the different brands. He was too green a hand to do anything but help hold the "cut," and that was so much like ordinary herding that his interest flagged. He wanted, more than anything, to ride into the bunch and single out a Lazy Eight steer, skilfully hazing him down the slope to the cut, as he saw the others do.

Bob told him it was the biggest mix-up he had ever seen—and Bob had ridden the range in every State where beef grows wild. He was in the thickest of the huddle—was Bob, working as if he did not know the meaning of fatigue. Thurston, watching him thread his way in and out of the restless, milling herd, only to reappear unexpectedly at the edge with a steer just before the nose of

his horse, rush it out from among the others—wheeling, darting this way and that, as it tried to dodge back, and always coming off victor, wondered if he could ever learn to do it.

Being in pessimistic mood, he told himself that he would probably always remain a greenhorn, to be borne with and coached and given boy's work to do; all because he had been cheated of his legacy of the dim trails and forced to grow up in a city, hedged about all his life by artificial conditions, his conscience wedded to convention.

CHAPTER VI

THE BIG DIVIDE

THE long drive was nearly over. Even Thurston's eyes brightened when he saw, away upon the sky-line, the hills that squatted behind the home ranch of the Lazy Eight. The past month had been one of rapid living under new conditions, and at sight of them it seemed only a few days since he had first glimpsed that broken line of hills and the bachelor household in the coulee below.

As the travel-weary herd swung down the long hill into the valley of the Milk River, stepping out briskly as they sighted the cool water in the near dis-

tance, the past month dropped away from Thurston, and what had gone just before came back fresh as the happenings of the morning. There was the Stevens ranch, a scant half mile away from where the tents already gleamed on their last camp of the long trail; the smoke from the cook-tent telling of savory meats and puddings, the bare thought of which made one hurry his horse.

His eyes dwelt longest, however, upon the Stevens house half hidden among the giant cottonwoods, and he wondered if Mona would still smile at him with that unpleasant uplift at the corner of her red mouth. He would take care that she did not get the chance to smile at him in any fashion, he told himself with decision.

He wondered if those train-robbers had been captured, and if the one Park wounded was still alive. He shivered when he thought of the dead man in the

aisle, and hoped he would never witness another death; involuntarily he glanced down at his right stirrup, half expecting to see his boot red with human blood. It was not nice to remember—that scene, and he gave his shoulders an impatient hitch and tried to think of something else.

Mindful of his vow, he had bought a gun in Billings, but he had not yet learned to hit anything he aimed at; for firearms are hushed in roundup camps, except when dire necessity breeds a law of its own. Range cattle do not take kindly to the popping of pistols. So Thurston's revolver was yet unstained with powder grime, and was packed away inside his bed. He was promising his pride that he would go up on the hill, back of the Lazy Eight corrals, and shoot until even Mona Stevens must respect his marksmanship, when Park galloped back to him.

"The world has moved some while we was gone," he announced in the tone of one who has news to tell and enjoys thoroughly the telling. "Yuh mind the fellow I laid out in the hold-up? He got all right again, and they stuck him in jail along with another one old Lauman, the sheriff, glommed a week ago. Well, they didn't do a thing last night but knock a deputy in the head, annex his gun, swipe a Winchester and a box uh shells out uh the office and hit the high places. Old Lauman is hot on their trail, but he ain't met up with 'em yet, that anybody's heard. When he does, there'll sure be something doing! They say the deputy's about all in; they smashed his skull with a big iron poker."

"I wish I could handle a gun," Thurston said between his teeth. "I'd go after them myself. I wish I'd been left to grow up out here where I belong. I'm

all West but the training—and I never knew it till a month ago! I ought to ride and rope and shoot with the best of you —and I can't do a thing. All I know is books. I can criticise an opera and a new play, and I'm considered something of an authority on clothes, but I can't shoot——"

"Aw, go easy," Park laughed at him. "What if yuh can't do the double-roll? Riding and shooting and roping's all right—we couldn't very well get along without them accomplishments. But that's all they are; just accomplishments. We know a *man* when we see him, and it don't matter whether he can ride a bronk straight up, or don't know which way a saddle sets on a horse. If he's a man he gets as square a deal as we can give him." Park reached for his cigarette book. "And as for hunting outlaws," he finished, "we've got old Lauman paid to do that. And he's dead onto his job,

you bet; when he goes out after a man he comes pretty near getting him, m'son. But I sure do wish I'd killed that jasper while I was about it; it would have saved Lauman a lot uh hard riding."

Thurston could scarcely explain to Park that his desire to hunt train-robbers was born of a half-defiant wish to vindicate to Mona Stevens his courage, and so he said nothing at all. He wondered if Park had heard her whisper, that day, and knew how he had failed to obey her commands; and if he had heard her call him a coward. He had often wondered that, but Park had a way of keeping things to himself, and Thurston could never quite bring himself to open the subject boldly. At any rate, if Park had heard, he hoped that he understood how it was and did not secretly despise him for it. Women, he told himself bitterly, are never quite just.

After the four o'clock supper he and Bob MacGregor went up the valley to relieve the men on herd. There was one nice thing about Park as a foreman: he tried to pair off his crew according to their congeniality. That was why Thurston usually stood guard with Bob, whom he liked better than any of the others—always excepting Park himself.

"I brought my gun along," Bob told him apologetically when they were left to themselves. "It's a habit I've got when I know there's bad men rampaging around the country. The boys kinda gave me the laugh when they seen me haul it out uh my war bag, but I just told 'em to go to thunder."

"Do you think those——"

"Naw. Uh course not. I just pack it on general principles, same as an old woman packs her umbrell'."

"Say, this is dead easy! The bunch

is pretty well broke, ain't it? I'm sure glad to see old Milk River again; this here trailing cattle gets plumb monotonous." He got down and settled his back comfortably against a rock. Below them spread the herd, feeding quietly. "Yes, sir, this is sure a snap," he repeated, after he had made himself a smoke. "They's only two ways a bunch could drift if they wanted to—which they don't—up the river, or down. This hill's a little too steep for 'em to tackle unless they was crowded hard. Good feed here, too.

"Too bad yuh don't smoke, Bud. There's nothing like a good, smooth rock to your back and a cigarette in your face, on a nice, lazy day like this. It's the only kind uh day-herding I got any use for."

"I'll take the rock to my back, if you'll just slide along and make room," Thurston laughed. "I don't hanker for a cigarette, but I do wish I had my kodak."

"Aw, t'ell with your kodak!" Bob snorted. "Can't yuh carry this layout in your head? I've got a picture gallery in mine that I wouldn't trade for a farm; I don't need no kodak in mine, thankye. You just let this here view soak into your system, Bud, where yuh can't lose it."

Thurston did. Long after he could close his eyes and see it in every detail: the long, green slope with hundreds of cattle loitering in the rank grass-growth; the winding sweep of the river and the green, rolling hills beyond; and Bob leaning against the rock beside him, smoking luxuriously with half-closed eyes, while their horses dozed with drooping heads a rein-length away.

"Say, Bud," Bob's voice drawled sleepily, "I wisht you'd sing that Jerusalem song. I want to learn the words to it; I'm plumb stuck on that piece. It's different from the general run uh songs,

don't yuh think? Most of 'em's about your old home that yuh left in boyhood's ha-a-appy days, and go back to find your girl dead and sleeping in a little churchyard—or else it's your mother; or your girl marries the other man and you get it handed to yuh right along—and they make a fellow kinda sick to his stomach when he's got to sing 'em two or three hours at a stretch on night-guard, just because he's plumb ignorant of anything better. This here Jerusalem one sounds kinda grand, and—the cattle seems to like it, too, for a change."

"The composer would feel flattered if he heard that," Thurston laughed. He wanted to be left alone to day-dream and watch the clouds trail lazily across to meet the hills; and there was an embryonic poem forming, phrase by phrase, in his mind. But he couldn't refuse Bob anything, so he sat a bit straighter and

cleared his throat. He sang well—well enough indeed to be sought after at informal affairs among his set at home. When he came to the refrain Bob took his cigarette from between his lips and held it in his fingers while he joined his voice lustily to Thurston's:

> Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
> Lift up your gates and sing
> Hosanna in the *high*-est,
> Hosanna to your King!

The near cattle lifted their heads to stare stupidly a moment, then moved a few steps slowly, nosing for the sweetest grass-tufts. The horses shifted their weight, resting one leg with the hoof barely touching the earth, twitched their ears at the flies and slept again.

> And then methought my dream was changed,
> The streets no longer rang,
> Hushed were the glad Hosannas
> The little children sang——

Tamale lifted his head and gazed inquiringly up the hill; but Bob was not observant of signs just then. He was striving with his recreant memory for the words that came after:

> The sun grew dark with mystery,
> The morn was cold and still,
> As the shadow of a cross arose
> Upon a lonely hill.

Tamale stirred restlessly with head uplifted and ears pointed straight before up the steep bluff. Old Ironsides, Thurston's mount, was not the sort to worry about anything but his feed, and paid no attention. Bob turned and glanced the way Tamale was looking; saw nothing, and settled down again on the small of his back.

"He sees a badger or something," he said. "Go on, Bud, with the chorus."

> Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
> Lift up your gates and sing

"Lift up your hands damn quick!" mimicked a voice just behind. "If yuh ain't got anything to do but lay in the shade of a rock and yawp, we'll borrow your cayuses. You ain't needin' 'em, by the looks!"

They squirmed around until they could stare into two black gun-barrels—and then their hands went up; their faces held a particularly foolish expression that must have been amusing to the men behind the guns.

One of the gun-barrels lowered and a hand reached out and quietly took possession of Tamale's reins; the owner of the hand got calmly into Bob's saddle. Bob gritted his teeth. It was evident their movements had been planned minutely in advance, for, once settled to his liking, the fellow tested the stirrups to make sure they were the right length, and raising his gun pointed it at the two

in a business-like manner that left no doubt of his meaning. Whereupon the man behind them came forward and appropriated Old Ironsides to his own use.

"Too bad we had to interrupt Sunday-school," he remarked ironically. "You can go ahead with the meetin' now—the collection has been took up." He laughed without any real mirth in his voice and gathered up the reins. "If yuh want our horses, they're up on the bench. I don't reckon they'll ever turn another cow, but such as they are you're quite welcome. Better set still, boys, till we get out uh sight; one of us'll keep an eye peeled for yuh. So long, and much obliged." They turned and rode warily down the slope.

"Now, wouldn't that jar yuh?" asked Bob in deep disgust. His hands dropped to his sides; in another second he was up

A rifle cracked and Bob toppled limply to the grass.

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and shooting savagely. "Get behind the rock, Bud," he commanded.

Just then a rifle cracked, and Bob toppled drunkenly and went limply to the grass.

"My God!" cried Thurston, and didn't know that he spoke. He snatched up Bob's revolver and fired shot after shot at the galloping figures. Not one seemed to do any good; the first shot hit a two-year-old square in the ribs. After that there were no cattle within rifle range.

One of the outlaws stopped, took deliberate aim with the stolen Winchester and fired, meaning to kill; but he miscalculated the range a bit and Thurston crumpled down with a bullet in his thigh. The revolver was empty now and fell smoking at his feet. So he lay and cursed impotently while he watched the marauders ride out of sight up the valley.

When the rank timber-growth hid their flying figures he crawled over to where Bob lay and tried to lift him.

"Art you hurt?" was the idiotic question he asked.

Bob opened his eyes and waited a breath, as if to steady his thought. "Did I get one, Bud?"

"I'm afraid not," Thurston confessed, and immediately after wished that he had lied and said yes. "Are you hurt?" he repeated senselessly.

"Who, me?" Bob's eyes wavered in their directness. "Don't yuh bother none about *me*," evasively.

"But you've got to tell me. You—they—" He choked over the words.

"Well—I guess they got me, all right. But don't let that worry yuh; it don't me." He tried to speak carelessly and convincingly, but it was a miserable failure. He did not want to die—did Bob

—however much he might try to hide the fact.

Thurston was not in the least imposed upon. He turned away his head, pretending to look after the outlaws, and set his teeth together tight. He did not want to act a fool. All at once he grew dizzy and sick, and lay down heavily till the faintness passed.

Bob tried to lift himself to his elbow; failing that, he put out a hand and laid it on Thurston's shoulder. "Did they —get you—too?" he queried anxiously. "The damn coyotes!"

"It's nothing; just a leg put out of business," Thurston hurried to assure him. "Where are you hurt, Bob?"

"Aw, I ain't any X-ray," Bob retorted weakly but gamely. "Somewheres inside uh me. It went in my side —but the Lord knows—where it wound —up. It hurts, like—the devil." He

lay quiet a minute. "I wish—do yuh feel—like finishing—that song, Bud?"

Thurston gulped down a lump that was making his throat ache. When he answered, his voice was very gentle. "I'll try a verse, old man."

"The last one—we'd just come—to the last. It's most like—church. I—I never went—much—on religion, Bud; but when—a fellow's—going out—over the Big Divide——"

"You're not!" Thurston contradicted fiercely, as if that could make it different. He thought he could not bear those jerky sentences.

"All right—Bud. We won't fight—over it. Go ahead. The last verse."

Thurston eased his leg to a better position, drew himself up till his shoulders rested against the rock and began, with an occasional, odd break in his voice:

I saw the holy city
Beside the tideless sea;
The light of God was on it's street,
The gates were open wide,
And all who would might enter
And no one was denied.

"Wonder if that there—applies—to bone-headed—cowpunchers," Bob muttered drowsily. "'And all — who would——'"

Thurston glanced quickly at his face; caught his breath sharply at what he saw there written, and dropped his head upon his arms.

And so Park and his men, hurrying to the sound of the shooting, found them in the shadow of the rock.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE STEVENS PLACE

HEN the excitement of the outrage had been pushed aside by the insistent routine of everyday living, Thurston found himself thrust from the fascination of range life and into the monotony of invalidism, and he was anything but resigned. To be sure, he was well cared for at the Stevens ranch, where Park and the boys had taken him that day, and Mrs. Stevens mothered him as he could not remember being mothered before.

Hank Graves rode over nearly every day to sit beside the bed and curse the

Wagner gang back to their great-great-grandfathers and down to more than the third generation yet unborn, and to tell him the news. On the second visit he started to give him the details of Bob's funeral; but Thurston would not listen, and told him so plainly.

"All right then, Bud, I won't talk about it. But we sure done the right thing by the boy; had the best preacher in Shellanne out, and flowers till further notice: a cross uh carnations, and the boys sent up to Minot and had a spur made uh—oh, well, all right; I'll shut up about it. I know how yuh feel, Bud; it broke us all up to have him go that way. He sure was a white boy, if ever there was one, and—ahem!"

"I'd give a thousand dollars, hard coin, to get my hands on them Wagners. It would uh been all off with them, sure, if the boys had run acrost 'em. I'd uh

let 'em stay out and hunt a while longer, only old Lauman'll get 'em, all right, and we're late as it is with the calf roundup. Lauman'll run 'em down—and by the Lord! I'll hire Bowman myself and ship him out from Helena to help prosecute 'em. They're dead men if he takes the case against 'em, Bud, and I'll get him, sure—and to hell with the cost of it! They'll swing for what they done to you and Bob, if it takes every hoof I own."

Thurston told him he hoped they would be caught and—yes, hanged; though he had never before advocated capital punishment.

But when he thought of Bob, the carenaught, whole-souled fellow— He tried not to think of him, for thinking unmanned him. He had the softest of hearts where his friends were concerned, and there were times when he felt that he could with relish officiate at the Wagners' execution.

He fought against remembrance of that day; and for sake of diversion he took to studying a large, pastel portrait of Mona which hung against the wall opposite his bed. It was rather badly done, and at first, when he saw it, he laughed at the thought that even the great, still plains of the range-land cannot protect one against the ubiquitous picture agent. In the parlor, he supposed there would be crayon pictures of grandmothers and aunts—further evidence of the agent's glibness.

He was glad that it was Mona who

smiled down at him instead of a grandmother or an aunt. For Mona did smile, and in spite of the cheap crudity the smile was roguish, with little dimply creases at the corners of the mouth, and not at all unpleasant. If the girl would only look like that in real life, he told himself, a fellow would probably get to liking her. He supposed she thought him a greater coward than ever now, just because he hadn't got killed. If he had, he would be a hero now, like Bob. Well, Bob *was* a hero; the way he had jumped up and begun shooting required courage of the suicidal sort. He had stood up and shot, also—and had succeeded only in being ridiculous; he hoped nobody had told Mona about his hitting that steer. When he could walk again he would learn to shoot, so that the range stock wouldn't suffer from his marksmanship.

After a week of seeing only Mrs.

Stevens or sympathetic men acquaintances, he began to wonder why Mona stayed so persistently away. Then one morning she came in to take his breakfast things out. She did not, however, stay a second longer than was absolutely necessary, and she was perfectly composed and said good morning in her most impersonal tone. At least Thurston hoped she had no tone more impersonal than that. He decided that she had really beautiful eyes and hair; after she had gone he looked up at the picture, told himself that it did not begin to do her justice, and sighed a bit. He was very dull, and even her companionship, he thought, would be pleasant if only she would come down off her pedestal and be humanly sociable.

When he wrote a story about a fellow being laid up in the same house with a girl—a girl with big, blue-gray eyes and

ripply brown hair—he would have the girl treat the fellow at least decently. She would read poetry to him and bring him flowers, and do ever so many nice things that would make him hate to get well. He decided that he would write just that kind of story; he would idealize it, of course, and have the fellow in love with the girl; you have to, in stories. In real life it doesn't necessarily follow that, because a fellow admires a girl's hair and eyes, and wants to be on friendly terms, he is in love with her. For example, he emphatically was not in love with Mona Stevens. He only wanted her to be decently civil and to stop holding a foolish grudge against him for not standing up and letting himself be shot full of holes because she commanded it.

In the afternoons Mrs. Stevens would sit beside him and knit things and talk to him in a pleasantly garrulous fashion,

and he would lie and listen to her—and to Mona, singing somewhere. Mona sang very well, he thought; he wondered if she had ever had any training. Also, he wished he dared ask her not to sing that song about "She's only a bird in a gilded cage." It brought back too vividly the nights when he and Bob stood guard under the quiet stars.

And then one day he hobbled out into the dining-room and ate dinner with the family. Since he sat opposite Mona she was obliged to look at him occasionally, whether she would or no. Thurston had a strain of obstinacy in his nature, and when he decided that Mona should not only look at him, but should talk to him as well, he set himself diligently to attain that end. He was not the man to sit down supinely and let a girl calmly ignore him; so Mona presently found herself talking to him with some degree

of cordiality; and what is more to the point, listening to him when he talked. It is probable that Thurston never had tried so hard in his life to win a girl's attention.

It was while he was still hobbling with a cane and taxing his imagination daily to invent excuses for remaining, that Lauman, the sheriff, rode up to the door with a deputy and asked shelter for themselves and the two Wagners, who glowered sullenly down from their weary horses. When they had been safely disposed in Thurston's bedroom, with one of the ranch hands detailed to guard them, Lauman and his man gave themselves up to the joy of a good meal. Their own cooking, they said, got mighty tame—especially when they hadn't much to cook and dared not have a fire.

They had come upon the outlaws by mere accident, and it is hard telling which

was the most surprised. But Lauman was, perhaps, the quickest man with a gun in Valley County—else he would not have been serving his fourth term as sheriff. He got the drop and kept it while his deputy did the rest. It had been a hard chase, he said, and a long one if you counted time instead of miles. But he had them now, harmless as rattlers with their fangs fresh drawn. He wanted to get them to Glasgow before people got to hear of their capture; he thought they wouldn't be any too safe if the boys knew he had them.

If he had known that the Lazy Eight roundup had just pulled in to the home ranch that afternoon, and that Dick Farney, one of the Stevens men, had slipped out to the corral and saddled his swiftest horse, it is quite possible that Lauman would not have lingered so long over his supper, or drank his third cup

of coffee—with real cream in it—with so great a relish. And if he had known that the Circle Bar boys were camped just three miles away within hailing distance of the Lazy Eight trail, he would doubtless have postponed his after-supper smoke.

He was sitting, revolver in hand, watching the Wagners give a practical demonstration of the extent of their appetites, when Thurston limped in from the porch, his eyes darker than usual. "There are a lot of riders coming, Mr. Lauman," he announced quietly. "It sounds like a whole roundup. I thought you ought to know."

The prisoners went white, and put down knife and fork. If they had never feared before, plainly they were afraid then.

Lauman's face did not in the least change. "Put the hand-cuffs on,

Waller," he said. " If you've got a room that ain't easy to get at from the outside, Mrs. Stevens, I guess I'll have to ask yuh for the use of it."

Mrs. Stevens had lived long in Valley County, and had learned how to meet emergencies. " Put 'em right down cellar," she invited briskly. " There's just the trap-door into it, and the windows ain't big enough for a cat to go through. Mona, get a candle for Mr. Lauman." She turned to hurry the girl, and found Mona at her elbow with a light.

" That's the kind uh woman I like to have around," Lauman chuckled. " Come on, boys; hustle down there if yuh want to see Glasgow again."

Trembling, all their dare-devil courage sapped from them by the menace of Thurston's words, they stumbled down the steep stairs, and the darkness swallowed them. Lauman beckoned to his deputy.

"You go with 'em, Waller," he ordered. "If anybody but me offers to lift this trap, shoot. Don't yuh take any chances. Blow out that candle soon as you're located."

It was then that fifty riders clattered into the yard and up to the front door, grouping in a way that left no exit unseen. Thurston, standing in the doorway, knew them almost to a man. Lazy Eight boys, they were; men who night after night had spread their blankets under the tent-roof with him—and with Bob MacGregor; Bob, who lay silently out on the hill back of the home ranch-house, waiting for the last, great round-up. They glanced at him in mute greeting and dismounted without a word. With them mingled the Circle Bar boys, as silent and grim as their fellows. Lauman came up and peered into the dusk; Thurston observed that he car-

ried his Winchester unobtrusively in one hand.

"Why, hello, boys," he greeted cheerfully. But for the rifle you never would have guessed he knew their errand.

"Hello, Lauman," answered Park, matching him for cheerfulness. Then: "We rode over to hang them Wagners."

Lauman grinned. "I hate to disappoint yuh, Park, but I've kinda set my heart on doing that litle job myself. I'm the one that caught 'em, and if you'd followed my trail the last month you'd say I earned the privilege."

"Maybe so," Park admitted pleasantly, "but we've got a little personal matter to settle up with those jaspers. Bob MacGregor was one of us, yuh remember."

"I'll hang 'em just as dead as you can," Lauman argued.

"But yuh won't do it so quick," Park

flashed back. "They're spoiling the air every breath they draw. We want 'em, and I guess that pretty near settles it."

"Not by a damn sight it don't! I've never had a man took away from me yet, boys, and I've been your sheriff a good many years. You hike right back to camp; yuh can't have 'em."

Thurston could scarcely realize the deadliness of their purpose. He knew them for kind-hearted, laughter-loving young fellows, who would give their last dollar to a friend. He could not believe that they would resort to violence now. Besides, this was not his idea of a mob; he had fancied they would howl threats and wave bludgeons, as they did in stories. Mobs always "howled and seethed with passion" at one's doors; they did not stand about and talk quietly as though the subject was trivial and did not greatly concern them.

But the men were pressing closer, and their very calmness, had he known it, was ominous. Lauman shifted his rifle ready for instant aim.

"Boys, look here," he began more gravely, "I can't say I blame yuh, looking at it from your view-point. If you'd caught these men when yuh was out hunting 'em, you could uh strung 'em up—and I'd likely uh had business somewhere else about that time. But yuh didn't catch 'em; yuh give up the chase and left 'em to me. And yuh got to remember that I'm the one that brought 'em in. They're in my care. I'm sworn to protect 'em and turn 'em over to the law—and it ain't a question uh whether they deserve it or not. That's what I'm paid for, and I expect to go right ahead according to orders and hang 'em by law. You can't have 'em—unless yuh lay me out first, and I don't reckon any of yuh would go that far."

"There's never been a man hung by law in this county yet," a voice cried angrily and impatiently.

"That ain't saying there never will be," Lauman flung back. "Don't yuh worry —they'll get all that's coming to them, all right."

"How about the time yuh had 'em in your rotten old jail, and let 'em get out and run loose around the country, killing off *white* men?" drawled another—a Circle-Bar man.

"Now boys——"

A hand—the hand of him who had stood guard over the Wagners in the bedroom during supper—reached out through the doorway and caught his rifle arm. Taken unawares from behind, he whirled and then went down under the weight of men used to "wrassling" calves. Even old Lauman was no match for them, and presently he found him-

self stretched upon the porch with three Lazy Eight boys sitting on his person; which, being inclined to portliness, he found very uncomfortable.

Moved by an impulse he had no name for, Thurston snatched the sheriff's revolver from its scabbard. As the heap squirmed pantingly upon the porch he stepped into the doorway to avoid being tripped, which was the wisest move he could have made, for it put him in the shadow—and there were men of the Circle Bar whose trigger-finger would not have hesitated, just then, had he been in plain sight and had they known his purpose.

"Just hold on there, boys," he called, and they could see the glimmer of the gun-barrel. Those of the Lazy Eight laughed at him.

"Aw, put it down, Bud," Park admonished. "That's too dangerous a toy for

you to be playing with—and yuh know damn well yuh can't hit anything."

"I killed a steer once," Thurston reminded him meekly, whereat the laugh hushed; for they remembered.

"I know I can't shoot straight," he went on frankly, "but you're taking that much the greater chance. If I have to, I'll cut loose—and there's no telling where the bullets may strike."

"That's right," Park admitted. "Stand still, boys; he's more dangerous than a gun that isn't loaded. What d'yuh want, m'son?"

"I want to talk to you for about five minutes. I've got a game leg, so that I can neither run nor fight, but I hope you'll listen to me. The Wagners can't get away—they're locked up, with a deputy standing over them with a gun; and on top of that they're handcuffed. They're as helpless, boys, as two trapped

coyotes." He looked down over the crowd, which shifted uneasily; no one spoke.

"That's what struck me most," he continued. "You know what I thought of Bob, don't you? And I didn't thank them for boring a hole in my leg; it wasn't any kindness of theirs that it didn't land higher—they weren't shooting at me for fun. And I'd have killed them both with a clear conscience, if I could. I tried hard enough. But it was different then; out in the open, where a man had an even break. I don't believe if I had shot as straight as I wanted to that I'd ever have felt a moment's compunction. But now, when they're disarmed and shackled and altogether helpless, I couldn't walk up to them deliberately and kill them—could you?

"It could be done, and done

easily. You have Lauman where he can't do anything, and I'm not of much account in a fight; so you've really only one deputy sheriff and two women to get the best of. You could drag these men out and hang them in the cottonwoods, and they couldn't raise a hand to defend themselves. We could do it easily—but when it was done and the excitement had passed I'd have a picture in my memory that I'd hate to look at. I'd have an hour in my life that would haunt me. And so would you. You'd hate to look back and think that one time you helped kill a couple of men who couldn't fight back.

"Let the law do it, boys. You don't want them to live, and I don't; nobody does, for they deserve to die. But it isn't for us to play judge and jury and hangman here to-night. Let them get what's coming to them at the hands of the offi-

cers you've elected for that purpose. They won't get off. Hank Graves says they will hang if it takes every hoof he owns. He said he would bring Bowman down here to help prosecute them. I don't know Bowman——"

"I do," a voice spoke, somewhere in the darkness. "Lawyer from Helena. Never lost a case."

"I'm glad to hear it, for he's the man that will prosecute. They haven't a ghost of a show to get out of it. Lauman here is responsible for their safe keeping—and I guess, now that he knows them better, we needn't be afraid they'll escape again. And it's as Lauman said; he'll hang them quite as dead as you can. He's drawing a salary to do these things—make him earn it. It's a nasty job, boys, and you wouldn't get anything out of it but a nasty memory."

A hand that did not feel like the hand

of a man rested for an instant on his arm. Mona brushed by him and stepped out where the rising moon shone on her hair and into her big, blue-gray eyes.

"I wish you all would please go away," she said. "You are making mamma sick. She's got it in her head that you are going to do something awful, and I can't convince her you're not. I told her you wouldn't do anything so *sneaking,* but she's awfully nervous about it. Won't you please go, right now?"

They looked sheepishly at one another; every man of them feared the ridicule of his neighbor.

"Why, sure we'll go," cried Park, rallying. "We were going anyway in a minute. Tell your mother we were just congratulating Lauman on rounding up these Wagners. Come on, boys. And you, Bud, hurry up and get well again; we miss yuh round the Lazy Eight."

The three who were sitting on Lauman got up, and he gave a sigh of relief. "Say, yuh darned cowpunchers don't have no mercy on an old man's carcass at all," he groaned, in exaggerated self-pity. "Next time yuh want to congratulate me, I wish you'd put it in writing and send it by mail."

A little ripple of laughter went through the crowd. Then they swung up on their horses and galloped away in the moonlight.

CHAPTER VIII

A QUESTION OF NERVE

"THAT was *your* victory, Miss Stevens. Allow me to congratulate you." If Thurston showed any ill grace in his tone it was without intent. But it did seem unfortunate that just as he was waxing eloquent and felt sure of himself and something of a hero, Mona should push him aside as though he were of no account and disperse a bunch of angry cowboys with half a dozen words.

She looked at him with her direct, blue-gray eyes, and smiled. And her smile had no unpleasant uplift at the corners;

it was the dimply, roguish smile of the pastel portrait—only several times nicer. He could hardly believe it; he just opened his eyes wide and stared. When he came to a sense of his rudeness, Mona was back in the kitchen helping with the supper dishes, just as though nothing had happened—unless one observed the deep, apple-red of her cheeks—while her mother, who showed not the faintest symptoms of collapse, flourished a dish towel made of a bleached flour sack with the stamp showing a faint pink and blue XXXX across the center.

"I knew all the time they wouldn't do anything when it came right to the point," she declared. "Bless their hearts, they thought they would—but they're too soft-hearted, even when they are mad. If yuh go at 'em right yuh can talk 'em over easy. It done me good to hear yuh talk right up to 'em, Bud." Mrs. Stevens

had called him Bud from the first time she laid eyes on him. "That's all under the sun they needed—just somebody to set 'em thinking about the other side. You're a real good speaker; seems to me you ought to study to be a preacher."

Thurston's face turned red. But presently he forgot everything in his amazement, for Mona the dignified, Mona of the scornful eyes and the chilly smile, actually giggled—giggled like any ordinary girl, and shot him a glance that had in it pure mirth and roguish teasing, and a dash of coquetry. He sat down and giggled with her, feeling idiotically happy and for no reason under the sun that he could name.

He had promised his conscience that he would go home to the Lazy Eight in the morning, but he didn't; he somehow contrived, overnight, to invent a brand new excuse for his conscience to swallow or

not, as it liked. Hank Graves had the same privilege; as for the Stevens trio, he blessed their hospitable souls for not wanting any excuse whatever for his staying. They were frankly glad to have him there; at least Mrs. Stevens and Jack were. As for Mona, he was not so sure, but he hoped she didn't mind.

This was the reason inspired by his great desire: he was going to write a story, and Mona was unconsciously to furnish the material for his heroine, and so, of course, he needed to be there so

that he might study his subject. That sounded very well, to himself, but to Hank Graves, for some reason, it seemed very funny. When Thurston told him, Hank was taken with a fit of strangling that turned his face a dark purple. Afterward he explained brokenly that something had got down his Sunday throat—and Thurston, who had never heard of a man's Sunday throat, eyed him with suspicion. Hank blinked at him with tears still in his quizzical eyes and slapped him on the back, after the way of the West—and any other enlightened country where men are not too dignified to be their real selves—and drawled, in a way peculiar to himself:

"That's all right, Bud. You stay right here as long as yuh want to. I don't blame yuh—if I was you I'd want to spend a lot uh time studying this particular brand uh female girl myself.

She's out uh sight, Bud—and I don't believe any uh the boys has got his loop on her so far; though I could name a dozen or so that would be tickled to death if they had. You just go right ahead and file your little, old claim——"

"You're getting things mixed," Thurston interrupted, rather testily. "I'm not in love with her. I—well, it's like this: if you were going to paint a picture of those mountains off there, you'd want to be where you could look at them—wouldn't you? You wouldn't necessarily want to—to own them, just because you felt they'd make a fine picture. Your interest would be—er—entirely impersonal."

"Uh-huh," Hank agreed, his keen eyes searching Phil's face amusedly.

"Therefore, it doesn't follow that I'm getting foolish about a girl just because I—hang it! what the dickens makes you

look at a fellow that way? You make me——"

"Uh-huh," said Hank again, smoothing the lower half of his face with one hand. "You're a mighty nice little boy, Bud—I'll bet Mona thinks so, too—and when yuh get growed up you'll know a whole lot more than yuh do right now. Well, I guess I'll be moving. When yuh get that—er—*story* done, you'll come back to the ranch, I reckon. Be good."

Thurston watched him ride away, and then flounced—oh, men *do* flounce at times, in spirit, if not in deed; and there would be no lack of the deed if only they wore skirts that could rustle indignantly in sympathy with the wearer—to his room. Plainly, Hank did not swallow the excuse—any more readily than did his conscience.

To prove the sincerity of his assertion to himself, his conscience, and to Hank

Graves, he straightway got out a thick pad of paper and sharpened three lead pencils to an exceeding fine point. Then he sat him down by the window—where he could see the kitchen door, which was the one most used by the family—and nibbled the tip off one of the pencils like any school-girl. For ten minutes he bluffed himself into believing that he was trying to think of a title; the plain truth is, he was wondering if Mona would go for a ride that afternoon—and if so, might he venture to suggest going with her.

He thought of the crimply waves in Mona's hair, and pondered what adjectives would best describe it without seeming commonplace. "Rippling" was too old, though it did seem to hit the case all right. He laid down the pad and nearly stood on his head trying to reach his Dictionary of Synonyms and An-

tonyms without getting out of his chair. While he was clawing after it—it lay on the floor, where he had thrown it that morning because it refused to divulge some information he wanted—he heard some one open and close the kitchen door, and came near kinking his neck trying to get up in time to see who it was. He failed to see anyone, and returned to the dictionary.

"'Ripple—to have waves—like running water.'" (That was just the way her hair looked, especially over the temples and at the nape of her neck—Jove, what a tempting white neck it was!) "Um-m. 'Ripple: wave; undulate; uneven; irregular.'" (Lord, what fools are the men who write dictionaries!) "'Antonym'—hang the antonyms!"

The kitchen door slammed. He craned again. It was Jack—going to town most likely. Thurston shrewdly guessed

that Mrs. Stevens leaned far more upon Mona than she did upon Jack, although he could hardly accuse her of leaning on anyone. But he observed that the men looked to her for orders.

He perceived that the point was gone from his pencil, and proceeded to sharpen it. Then he heard Mona singing in the kitchen, and recollected that Mrs. Stevens had promised him warm doughnuts for supper. Perhaps Mona was frying them at that identical moment—and he had never seen anyone frying doughnuts. He caught up his cane and limped out to investigate. That is how much his heart just then was set upon writing a story that would breathe of the plains.

One great hindrance to the progress of his story was the difficulty he had in selecting a hero for his heroine. Hank Graves suggested that he use Park, and even went so far as to supply Thurston

with considerable data which went to prove that Park would not be averse to figuring in a love story with Mona. But Thurston was not what one might call enthusiastic, and Hank laughed his deep, inner laugh when he was well away from the house.

Thurston, on the contrary, glowered at the world for two hours after. Park was a fine fellow, and Thurston liked him about as well as any man he knew in the West, but— And thus it went. On each and every visit to the Stevens ranch—and they were many—Hank, learning by direct inquiry that the story still suffered for lack of a hero, suggested some fellow whom he had at one time and another caught "shining" around Mona. And at each suggestion Thurston would draw down his eyebrows till he came near getting a permanent frown.

A love story without a hero, while it

would no doubt be original and all that, would hardly appeal to an editor. Phil tried heroes wholly imaginary, but he had a trick of making his characters seem very real to himself—and sometimes to other people as well. So that, after a few passages of more or less ardent love-making, he would in a sense grow jealous and spoil the story by annihilating the hero thereof.

Heaven only knows how long the thing would have gone on if he hadn't, one temptingly beautiful evening, reverted to the day of the hold-up and apologized for not obeying her command. He explained as well as he could just why he sat petrified with his hands in the air.

And then having brought the thing freshly to her mind, he somehow lost control of his wits and told her he loved her. He told her a good deal in the next two minutes that he might better have kept

to himself just then. But a man generally makes a glorious fool of himself once or twice in his life—and it seems the more sensible the man the more thorough a job he makes of it.

Mona moved a little farther away from him, and when she answered she did not choose her words. "Of all things," she said, evenly, "I admire a brave man and despise a coward. You were chicken-hearted that day, and you know it; you've just admitted it. Why, in another minute I'd have had that gun myself, and I'd have shown you—but Park got it before I really had a chance. I—hated to seem spectacular, but it served you right. If you'd had any nerve I wouldn't have had to sit there and tell you what to do. If ever I marry anybody, Mr. Thurston, it will be a *man*."

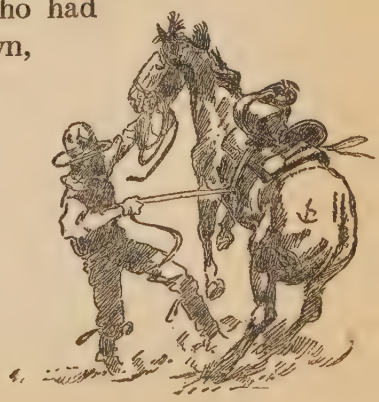
"Which means, I suppose, that I'm not one?" he asked angrily.

"I don't know—yet." Mona smiled her unpleasant smile—the one that did not belong in the story he was going to write. "You're new to the country, you see. Maybe you've got nerve; you haven't shown much, so far as I know—except when you talked to the boys that night. But you must have known that they wouldn't hurt you anyway. A man must have a little courage—as much as I have; which isn't asking much—or I'd never marry him in the world."

"Not even if you—liked him?" His smile was wistful.

"Not even if I—*loved* him!" Mona declared, and fled into the house.

Thurston gathered himself together and went down to the stable and borrowed a horse of Jack, who had just got back from town, and rode home to the Lazy Eight.



When Hank heard that he was home to stay—at least until he could join the roundup again—he didn't say a word for full five minutes. Then, "Got your story done?" he drawled, and his eyes twinkled.

Thurston was going up the stairs to his old room, and Hank could not swear positively to the reply he got. But he thought it sounded like, "Oh, damn the story!"

CHAPTER IX

THE DRIFT OF THE HERDS

WEEKS slipped by, and to Thurston they seemed but days. His world-weariness and cynicism disappeared the first time he met Mona after he had left there so unceremoniously; for Mona, not being aware of his cynicism, received him on the old, friendly footing, and seemed to have quite forgotten that she had ever called him a coward, or refused to marry him. So Thurston forgot it also—so long as he was with her.

How he filled in the hours he could scarcely have told; certain it is that he accomplished nothing at all so far as

Western stories were concerned. Reeve-Howard wrote in slightly shocked phrases to ask what was keeping him so long; and assured him that he was missing much by staying away. Thurston mentally agreed with him long enough to begin packing his trunk; it *was* idiotic to keep staying on when he was clearly receiving no benefit thereby. When, however, he picked up a book which he had told Mona he would take over to her the next time he went, he stopped and considered:

There was the Wagner trial coming off in a month or so; he couldn't get out of attending it, for he had been subpœnaed as a witness for the prosecution. And there was the beef roundup going to start before long—he really ought to stay and take that in; there would be some fine chances for pictures. And really he didn't care so much for the Barry Wilson bunch and the long list of

festivities which trailed ever in its wake; at any rate, they weren't worth rushing two-thirds across the continent for.

He sat down and wrote at length to Reeve-Howard, explaining very carefully—and not altogether convincingly—just why he could not possibly go home at present. After that he saddled and rode over to the Stevens place with the book, leaving his trunk yawning emptily in the middle of his badly jumbled belongings.

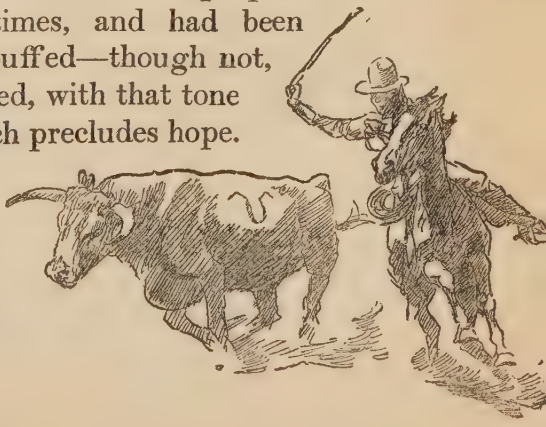
After that he spent three weeks on the beef roundup. At first he was full of enthusiasm, and worked quite as if he had need of the wages, but after two or three big drives the novelty wore off quite suddenly, and nothing then remained but a lot of hard work. For instance, standing guard on long, rainy nights when the cattle walked and walked might at first seem picturesque and all that, but

must at length cease to be amusing. Likewise the long hours which he spent on day-herd, when the wind was raw and penetrating and like to blow him out of the saddle; also standing at the stock-yard chutes and forcing an unwilling stream of rollicky, wild-eyed steers up into the cars that would carry them to Chicago.

After three weeks of it he awoke one particularly nasty morning and thanked the Lord he was not obliged to earn his bread at all, to say nothing of earning it in so distressful a fashion. There was a lull in the shipping because cars were not then available. He promptly took advantage of it and rode by the very shortest trail to the ranch—and Mona. But Mona was visiting friends in Chinook, and there was no telling when she would return. Thurston, in the next few days, owned to himself that there was no good reason for his tarrying longer in the

big, unpeopled West, and that the proper thing for him to do was go back home to New York.

He had come to stay a month, and he had stayed five. He could ride and rope like an old-timer, and he was well qualified to put up a stiff gun-fight had the necessity ever arisen—which it had not. He had three hundred and seventy-one pictures of different phases of range life, not counting as many that were over-exposed or under-exposed or out of focus. He had six unfinished stories, in each of which the heroine had big, blue-gray eyes and crimply hair, and the title and bare skeleton of a seventh, in which the same sort of eyes and hair would probably develop later. He had proposed to Mona three times, and had been three times rebuffed—though not, it must be owned, with that tone of finality which precludes hope.



He was tanned a fine brown, which became him well. His eyes had lost the dreamy, introspective look of the student and author, and had grown keen with the habit of studying objects at long range. He walked with that peculiar, stiff-legged gait which betrays long hours spent in the saddle, and he wore a silk handkerchief around his neck habitually and had forgotten the feel of a dress-suit.

He answered to the name " Bud " more readily than to his own, and he made practical use of the slang and colloquialisms of the plains without any mental quotation marks.

By all these signs and tokens he had learned his West, and should have taken himself back to civilization when came the frost. He had come to get into touch with his chosen field of fiction, that he might write as one knowing whereof he

spoke. So far as he had gone, he was in touch with it; he was steeped to the eyes in local color—and there was the rub. The lure of it was strong upon him, and he might not loosen its hold. He was the son of his father; he had found himself, and knew that, like him, he loved best to travel the dim trails.

Gene Wasson came in and slammed the door emphatically shut after him. "She's sure coming," he complained, while he pulled the icicles from his mustache and cast them into the fire. "She's going to be a real, old howler by the signs. What yuh doing, Bud? Writing poetry?"

Thurston nodded assent with certain mental reservations; so far the editors couldn't seem to make up their minds that it was poetry.

"Well, say, I wish you'd slap in a lot

uh things about hazy, lazy, daisy days in the spring—that jingles fine!—and green grass and the sun shining and making the hills all goldy yellow, and prairie dogs chip-chip-chipping on the 'dobe flats. (Prairie dogs would go all right in poetry, wouldn't they? They're sassy little cusses, and I don't know of anything that would rhyme with 'em, but maybe you do.) And read it all out to me after supper. Maybe it'll make me kinda forget there's a blizzard on."

"Another one?" Thurston got up to scratch a trench in the half-inch layer of frost on the cabin window. "Why, it only cleared up this morning after three days of it."

"Can't help that. This is just another chapter uh that same story. When these here Klondike chinooks gets to lapping over each other they never know when to quit. Every darn one has got

'to be continued' tacked onto the tail of it this winter. All the difference is, you can't read the writing; but *I* can.

"I've got some mail for yuh, Bud. And old Hank wanted me to ask yuh if you'd like to go to Glasgow next Thursday and watch old Lauman start the Wagner boys for—wherever's hot enough. He can get yuh in—you being in the writing business. He says to tell yuh it's a good chance to take notes, so yuh can write a real stylish story, with lots uh murder and sudden death in it. We don't hang folks out here very often, and yuh might have to go back East after pointers, if yuh pass this up."

"Oh, go easy. It turns me sick when I think about it; how they looked when they got their sentence, and all that. I certainly don't care to see them hanged, though they *do* deserve it. Where are the letters?" Thurston sprawled across

the table for them. One was from Reeve-Howard; he put it by. Another had a printed address in the corner—an address that started his pulse a beat or two faster; for he had not yet reached that blasé stage where he could receive a personal letter from one of the "Eight Leading" without the flicker of an eyelash. He still gloated over his successes, and was cast into the deeps by his failures.

He held the envelope to the light, shook it tentatively, like any woman, guessed hastily and hopefully at the contents, and tore off an end impatiently. From the great fireplace Gene watched him curiously and half enviously. He wished *he* could get important-looking letters from New York every few days. It must make a fellow feel that he amounted to something.

"Gene, you remember that story I read to you one night—that yarn about

the fellow that lived alone in the hills, and how the wolves used to come and sit on the ridge and howl o' nights—you know, the one you said was 'out uh sight'? They took it, all right, and—here, what do you think of that?" He tossed the letter over to Gene, who caught it just as it was about to be swept into the flame with the draught.

Thurston, in the days which he spent in one of the half-dozen Lazy Eight line-camps with Gene, down by the river, had been writing of the West—writing in fear and trembling, for now he knew how great was his subject and his ignorance of it. In the long evenings, while the fire crackled and the flames played a game they had invented—a game where they tried which could leap highest up the

great chimney; while the north wind whoo-ooed around the eaves and fine, frozen snow meal swished against the one little window; while shivering, drifting range cattle tramped restlessly through the sparse willow-growth seeking comfort where was naught but cold and snow and bitter, driving wind; while the gray wolves hunted in packs and had not long to wait for their supper, Thurston had written better than he knew. He had sent the cold of the blizzards and the howl of the wolves; he had sent bits of the wind-swept plains back to New York in long, white envelopes. And the editors were beginning to watch for his white envelopes and to seize them eagerly when they came, greedy for what was within. Not every day can they look upon a few typewritten pages and see the rangeland spread, now frowning, now smiling, before them.

"Gee! they say here they want a lot more uh the same brand, and at any old price yuh might name. I wouldn't mind writing stories myself." Gene kicked a log back into the flame where it would do the most good. His big, square-shouldered figure stood out sharply against the glow.

Thurston, watching him meditatively, wanted to tell him that he was the sort of whom good stories are made. But for men like Gene—strong, purposeful, brave, the West would lose half its charm. He was like Bob in many ways, and for that Thurston liked him and stayed with him in the line-camp when he might have been taking his ease at the home ranch.

It was wild and lonely down there between the bare hills and the frozen river, but the wildness and the loneliness appealed to him. It was primitive and at

times uncomfortable. He slept in a bunk built against the wall, with hard boards under him and a sod roof over his head. There were times when the wind blew its fiercest and rattled dirt down into his face unless he covered it with a blanket. And every other day he had to wash the dishes and cook, and when it was Gene's turn to cook, Thurston chopped great armloads of wood for the fireplace to eat o' nights. Also he must fare forth, wrapped to the eyes, and help Gene drive back the cattle which drifted into the river bottom, lest they cross the river on the ice and range where they should not.

But in the evenings he could sit in the fire-glow and listen to the wind and to the coyotes and the gray wolves, and weave stories that even the most hypercritical of editors could not fail to find convincing. By day he could push the

coffee-box that held his typewriter over by the frosted window—when he had an hour or two to spare—and whang away, at a rate which filled Gene with wonder. Sometimes he rode over to the home ranch for a day or two, but Mona was away studying music, so he found no inducement to remain, and drifted back to the little, sod-roofed cabin by the river, and to Gene.

The winter settled down with bared teeth like a bull-dog, and never a chinook came to temper the cold and give respite to man or beast. Blizzards that held them, in fear of their lives, close to shelter for days came down from the north; and with them came the drifting herds. By hundreds they came, hurrying miserably before the storms. When the wind lashed them without mercy even in the bottom-land, they pushed reluctantly out upon the snow-covered ice of

the Missouri. Then Gene and Thurston, watching from their cabin window, would ride out and turn them pitilessly back into the teeth of the storm.

They came by hundreds—thin, gaunt from cold and hunger. They came by thousands, lowing their misery as they wandered aimlessly, seeking that which none might find: food and shelter and warmth for their chilled bodies. When the Canada herds pushed down upon them the boys gave over trying to keep them north of the river; while they turned one bunch a dozen others were straggling out from shore, the timid following single file behind a leader more venturesome or more desperate than his fellows.

So the march went on and on: big, Southern-bred steer grappling the problem of his first Northern winter; thin-flanked cow with shivering, rough-coated calf trailing at her heels; humpbacked

yearling with little nubs of horns telling that he was lately in his calfhood; red cattle, spotted cattle, white cattle, black cattle; white-faced Herefords, Shorthorns, scrubs; Texas longhorns—of the sort invariably pictured in stampedes—still they came drifting out of the cold wilderness and on into wilderness as cold.

Through the shifting wall of the worst blizzard that season Thurston watched the weary, fruitless, endless march of the range. "Where do they all come from?" he exclaimed once when the snow-veil lifted and showed the river black with cattle.

"Lord! I dunno," Gene answered, shrugging his shoulders against the pity of it. "I seen some brands yesterday that I know belongs up in the Cypress Hills country. If things don't loosen up pretty soon, the whole darned range will be swept clean uh stock as far north as

cattle run. I'm looking for reindeer next."

"Something ought to be done," Thurston declared uneasily, turning away from the sight. "I've had the bellowing of starving cattle in my ears day and night for nearly a month. The thing's getting on my nerves."

"It's getting on the nerves uh them that own 'em a heap worse," Gene told him grimly, and piled more wood on the fire; for the cold bit through even the thick walls of the cabin when the flames in the fireplace died, and the door hinges were crusted deep with ice. "There's going to be the biggest loss this range has ever known."

"It's the owners' fault," snapped Thurston, whose nerves were in that irritable state which calls loudly for a vent of some sort. Even argument with Gene, fruitless though it perforce must be,

would be a relief. "It's their own fault. I don't pity *them* any—why don't they take care of their stock? If I owned cattle, do you think I'd sit in the house and watch them starve through the winter?"

"What if yuh owned more than yuh could feed? It'd be a case uh have-to then. There's fifty thousand Lazy Eight cattle walking the range somewhere today. How the dickens is old Hank going to feed them fifty thousand? or five thousand? It takes every spear uh hay he's got to feed his calves."

"He could buy hay," Thurston persisted.

"Buy hay for fifty thousand cattle? Where would he get it? Say, Bud, I guess yuh don't realize that's some *cattle.* All ails you is, yuh don't savvy the size uh the thing. I'll bet yuh there won't be less than three hundred thousand head cross this river before spring."

"Some of them belong in Canada—you said so yourself."

"I know it, but look at all the country south of us: all the other cow States. Why, Bud, when yuh talk about feeding every critter that runs the range, you're plumb foolish."

"Anyway, it's a damnable pity!" Thurston asserted petulantly.

"Sure it is. The grass is there, but it's under fourteen inches uh snow right now, and more coming; they say it's twelve feet deep up in the mountains. You'll see some great old times in the spring, Bud, if yuh stay. You will, won't yuh?"

Thurston laughed shortly. "I suppose it's safe to say I will," he answered. "I ought to have gone last fall, but I didn't. It will probably be the same thing over again; I ought to go in the spring, but I won't."

"You bet yuh won't. Talk about big

roundups! what yuh seen last spring wasn't a commencement. Every hoof that crosses this river and lives till spring will have to be rounded up and brought back again. They'll be scattered clean down to the Yellowstone, and every Northern outfit has got to go down and help work the range from there back. I tell yuh, Bud, yuh want to lay in a carload uh films and throw away all them little, jerk-water snap-shots yuh got. There's going to be roundups like these old Panhandle rannies tell about, when the green grass comes." Gene, thinking blissfully of the tented life, sprawled his long legs toward the snapping blaze and crooned dreamily, while without the blizzard raged more fiercely, a verse from an old camp song:

Out on the roundup, boys, I tell yuh what yuh get—
Little chunk uh bread and a little chunk uh meat;
Little black coffee, boys, chuck full uh alkali,

Dust in your throat, boys, and gravel in your eye!
So polish up your saddles, oil your slickers and your guns,
For we're bound for Lonesome Prairie when the green grass comes.

CHAPTER X

THE CHINOOK

ONE night in late March a sullen, faraway roar awakened Thurston in his bunk. He turned over and listened, wondering what on earth was the matter. More than anything it sounded like a hurrying freight train—only the railroad lay many miles to the north, and trains do not run at large over the prairie. Gene snored peacefully an arm's length away. Outside the snow lay deep on the levels, while in the hollows were great, white drifts that at bedtime had glittered frostily in the moonlight. On the hilltops the gray wolves howled across cou-

lees to their neighbors, and slinking coyotes yapped foolishly at the moon.

Thurston drew the blanket up over his ears, for the fire had died to a heap of whitening embers and the cold of the cabin made the nose of him tingle. The roar grew louder and nearer—then the cabin shivered and creaked in the suddenness of the blast that struck it. A clod of dirt plumbed down upon his shoulder, bringing with it a shower of finer particles. "Another blizzard!" he groaned, "and the worst we've had yet, by the sound."

The wind shrieked down the chimney and sought the places where the chinking was loose. It howled up the coulees, putting the wolves themselves to shame. Gene flopped over like a newly landed fish, grunted some unintelligible words and slept again.

For an hour Thurston lay and listened

to the blast and selfishly thanked heaven it was his turn at the cooking. If the storm kept up like that, he told himself, he was glad he did not have to chop the wood. He lifted the blanket and sniffed tentatively, then cuddled back into cover swearing that a thermometer would register zero at that very moment on his pillow.

The storm came in gusts as the worst blizzards do at times. It made him think of the nursery story about the fifth little pig who built a cabin of rocks, and how the wolf threatened: "I'll huff and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down!" It was as if he himself were the fifth little pig, and as if the wind were the wolf. The wolf-wind would stop for whole minutes, gather his great lungs full of air and then without warning would "huff and puff" his hardest. But though the cabin was not built of rocks,

it was nevertheless a staunch little shelter and sturdily withstood the shocks.

He pitied the poor cattle still fighting famine and frost as only range-bred stock can fight. He pictured them drifting miserably before the fury of the wind or crowding for shelter under some friendly cutbank, their tails to the storm, waiting stolidly for the dawn that would bring no relief. Then, with the roar and rattle in his ears, he fell asleep.

In that particular line-camp on the Missouri the cook's duties began with building a fire in the morning. Thurston waked reluctantly, shivered in anticipation under the blankets, gathered together his fortitude and crept out of his bunk. While he was dressing his teeth chattered like castanets in a minstrel show. He lighted the fire hurriedly and stood backed close before it, listening to the rage of the wind. He was growing

very tired of the monotony of winter; he could no longer see any beauty in the high-turreted, snow-clad hills, nor the bare, red faces of the cliffs frowning down upon him.

"I don't suppose you could see to the river bank," he mused, "and Gene will certainly tear the third commandment to shreds before he gets the water-hole open."

He went over to the window, meaning to scratch a peep-hole in the frost, just as he had done every day for the past three months; lifted a hand, then stopped bewildered. For instead of frost there was only steam with ridges of ice yet clinging to the sash and dripping water in a tiny rivulet. He wiped the steam hastily away with his palm and looked out.

"Good heavens, Gene!" he shouted in a voice to wake the Seven Sleepers. "The

world's gone mad overnight. Are you dead, man? Get up and look out. The whole damn country is running water, and the hills are bare as this floor!"

"Uh-huh!" Gene knuckled his eyes and sat up. "Chinook struck us in the night. Didn't yuh hear it?"

Thurston pulled open the door and stood face to face with the miracle of the West. He had seen Mother Nature in many a changeful mood, but never like this. The wind blew warm from the southwest and carried hints of green things growing and the song of birds; he breathed it gratefully into his lungs and let it riot in his hair. The sky was purplish and soft, with heavy, drifting clouds high-piled like a summer storm. It looked like rain, he thought.

The bare hills were sodden with snow-water, and the drifts in the coulees were dirt-grimed and forbidding. The great

river lay, a gray stretch of water-soaked snow over the ice, with little, clear pools reflecting the drab clouds above. A crow flapped lazily across the foreground and perched like a blot of fresh-spilled ink on the top of a dead cottonwood and cawed raucous greeting to the spring.

The wonder of it dazed Thurston and made him do unusual things that morning. All winter he had been puffed with pride over his cooking, but now he scorched the oatmeal, let the coffee boil over, and blackened the bacon, and committed divers other grievous sins against Gene's clamoring appetite. Nor did he feel the shame that he should have felt. He simply could not stay in the cabin five minutes at a time, and for it he had no apology.

After breakfast he left the dishes unwashed upon the table and went out and made merry with nature. He could

scarce believe that yesterday he had frosted his left ear while he brought a bucket of water up from the river, and that it had made his lungs ache to breathe the chill air. Now the path to the river was black and dry and steamed with warmth. Across the water cattle were feeding greedily upon the brown grasses that only a few hours before had been locked away under a crust of frozen snow.

"They won't starve now," he exulted, pointing them out to Gene.

"No, you bet not!" Gene answered. "If this don't freeze up on us the wagons 'll be starting in a month or so. I guess we can be thinking about hitting the trail for home pretty soon now. The river'll break up if this keeps going a week. Say, this is out uh sight! It's warmer out uh doors than it is in the house. Darn the old shack, anyway!

I'm plumb sick uh the sight of it. It looked all right to me in a blizzard, but now—it's me for the range, m'son." He went off to the stable with long, swinging strides that matched all nature for gladness, singing cheerily:

So polish up your saddles, oil your slickers and your guns,
For we're bound for Lonesome Prairie when the green grass comes.

CHAPTER XI

FOLLOWING THE DIM TRAILS

THURSTON did not go on the horse roundup. He explained to the boys, when they clamored against his staying, that he had a host of things to write, and it would keep him busy till they were ready to start with the wagons for the big rendezvous on the Yellowstone —the exact point of which had yet to be decided upon by the Stock Association when it met. The editors were after him, he said, and if he ever expected to get anywhere—in a literary sense—it behooved him to keep on the smily side of the editors.

That sounded all right as far as it went, but unfortunately it did not go far. The boys winked at one another gravely behind his back and jerked their thumbs knowingly toward Milk River; by which pantomime they reminded one another—quite unnecessarily—that Mona Stevens had come home. However, they kept their skepticism from becoming obtrusive, so that Thurston believed his excuses passed on their face value. The boys, it would seem, realized that it is against human nature for a man to declare openly to his fellows his intention of laying last, desperate siege to the heart of a girl who has already refused him three times, and to ask her for the fourth time if she will reconsider her former decisions and marry him.

That is really what kept Thurston at the Lazy Eight. His writing became once more a mere incident in his life.

During the winter, when he did not see her, he could bring himself to think occasionally of other things; and it is a fact that the stories he wrote with no heroine at all hit the mark the straightest.

Now, when he was once again under the spell of big, clear, blue-gray eyes and crimply brown hair, his stories lost something of their virility and verged upon the sentimental in tone. And since he was not a fool he realized the falling-off and chafed against it and wondered why it was. Surely a man who is in love should be well qualified to write convincingly of the obsession—but Thurston did not. He came near going to the other extreme and refusing to write at all.

The wagons were out two weeks—which is quite long enough for a crisis to arise in the love affair of any man. By the time the horse roundup was over, one Philip Thurston was in pessimistic mood

and quite ready to follow the wagons—the farther the better. Also, they could not start too soon to please him. His thoughts still ran to blue-gray eyes and crimply hair, but he made no attempt to put them into a story.

He packed his trunk carefully with everything he would not need on the roundup, and his typewriter he put in the middle. He told himself bitterly that he had done with crimply haired girls, and with every other sort of girl. If he could figure in something heroic—only he said melodramatic—he might possibly force her to think well of him. But heroic situations and opportunities come not every day to a man, and girls who demand that their knights shall be brave in face of death need not complain if they are left knightless at the last.

He wrote to Reeve-Howard, the night before they were to start, and apologized

gracefully for having neglected him during the past three weeks and told him he would certainly be home in another month. He said that he was "in danger of being satiated with the Western tone" and would be glad to shake the hand of civilized man once more. This was distinctly unfair, because he had no quarrel with the masculine portion of the West. If he had said civilized woman it would have been more just and more illuminating to Reeve-Howard who wondered what scrape Phil had gotten himself into with those savages.

For the first few days of the trip Thurston was in that frame of mind which makes a man want to ride by himself, with shoulders hunched moodily and eyes staring straight before the nose of his horse.

But the sky was soft and seemed to smile down at him, and the clouds loitered

in the blue of it and drifted aimlessly with no thought of reaching harbor on the skyline. From under his horse's feet the prairie sod sent up sweet, earthy odors into his nostrils and the tinkle of the bells in the saddle-bunch behind him made music in his ears—the sort of music a true cowboy loves. Yellow-throated meadow larks perched swaying in the top of gray sage bushes and sang to him that the world was good. Sober gray curlews circled over his head, their long, funny bills thrust out straight as if to point the way for their bodies to follow and cried, "Kor-r-*eck,* kor-r-*eck!*"—which means just what the meadow larks sang. So Thurston, hearing it all about him, seeing it and smelling it and feeling the riot of Spring in his blood, straightened the hunch out of his shoulders and admitted that it was all true: that the world was good.

At Miles City he found himself in the midst of a small army—the regulars of the range—which grew hourly larger as the outfits rolled in. The rattle of mess-wagons, driven by the camp cook and followed by the bed-wagon, was heard from all directions. Jingling cavvies (herds of saddle horses they were, driven and watched over by the horse wrangler) came out of the wilderness in the wake of the wagons. Thurston got out his camera and took pictures of the scene. In the first, ten different camps appeared; he mourned because two others were perforced omitted. Two hours later he snapped the kodak upon fifteen, and there were four beyond range of the lens.

Park came along, saw what he was doing and laughed. "Yuh better wait till they commence to *come*," he said. "When yuh can stand on this little hill and count fifty or sixty outfits camped

within two or three miles uh here, yuh might begin taking pictures."

"I think you're loading me," Thurston retorted calmly, winding up the roll for another exposure.

"All right—suit yourself about it." Park walked off and left him peering into the view-finder.

Still they came. From Swift Current to the Cypress Hills the Canadian cattlemen sent their wagons to join the big meet. From the Sweet Grass Hills to the mouth of Milk River not a stock-grower but was represented. From the upper Musselshell they came, and from out the Judith Basin; from Shellanne east to Fort Buford. Truly it was a gathering of the clans such as eastern Montana had never before seen.

For a day and a night the cowboys made merry in town while their foremen consulted and the captains appointed by

the Association mapped out the different routes. In times like these, foremen such as Park and Deacon Smith were shorn of their accustomed power, and worked under orders as strict as those they gave their men.

Their future movements thoroughly understood, the army moved down upon the range in companies of five and six crews, and the long summer's work began; each rider a unit in the war against the chaos which the winter had wrought; in the fight of the stockmen to wrest back their fortunes from the wilderness, and to hold once more their sway over the range-land.

Their method called for concerted action, although it was simple enough. Two of the Lazy Eight wagons, under Park and Gene Wasson (for Hank that spring was running four crews and had promoted Gene wagon-boss of one),

joined forces with the Circle-Bar, the Flying U, and a Yellowstone outfit whose wagon-boss, knowing best the range, was captain of the five crews; and drove north, gathering and holding all stock which properly ranged beyond the Missouri.

That meant day after day of "riding circle"—which is, being interpreted, riding out ten or twelve miles from camp, then turning and driving everything before them to a point near the centre of the circle thus formed. When they met the cattle were bunched, and all stock which belonged on that range was cut

out, leaving only those which had crossed the river during the storms of winter. These were driven on to the next camping place and held, which meant constant day-herding and night-guarding—work which cowboys hate more than anything else.

There would be no calf roundup proper that spring, for all calves were branded as they were gathered. Many there were among the she-stock that would not cross the river again; their carcasses made unsightly blots in the coulee-bottoms and on the wind-swept levels. Of the calves that had followed their mothers on the long trail, hundreds had dropped out of the march and been left behind for the wolves. But not all. Range-bred cattle are blessed with rugged constitutions and can bear much of cold and hunger. The cow that can turn tail to a biting wind the while she

ploughs to the eyes in snow and roots out a very satisfactory living for herself breeds calves that will in time do likewise and grow fat and strong in the doing. He is a sturdy, self-reliant little rascal—is the range-bred calf.

When fifteen hundred head of mixed stock, bearing Northern brands, were in the hands of the day-herders, Park and his crew were detailed to take them on and turn them loose upon their own range north of Milk River. Thurston felt that he had gleaned about all the experience he needed, and more than enough hard riding and short sleeping and hurried eating. He announced that he was ready to bid good-by to the range. He would help take the herd home, he told Park, and then he intended to hit the trail for little, old New York.

He still agreed with the meadow larks that the world was good, but he had made

himself believe that he really thought the civilized portion of it was better—especially when the uncivilized part holds a girl who persists in saying no when she should undoubtedly say yes, and insists that a man must be a hero, else she will have none of him.

CHAPTER XII

HIGH WATER

IT was nearing the middle of June, and it was getting to be a very hot June at that. For two days the trail-herd had toiled wearily over the hills and across the coulees between the Missouri and Milk River. Then the sky threatened for a day, and after that they plodded in the rain.

"Thank the Lord that's done with," sighed Park when he saw the last of the herd climb, all dripping, up the north bank of the Milk River. "To-morrow we can turn 'em loose. And I tell yuh,

Bud, we didn't get across none too soon. Yuh notice how the river's coming up? A day later and we'd have had to hold the herd on the other side—no telling how long."

"It *is* higher than usual; I noticed that," Thurston agreed absently. He was thinking more of Mona just then than of the river. He wondered if she would be at home. He could easily ride down there and find out. It wasn't far; not a quarter of a mile—but he assured himself that he wasn't going, and that he was not quite a fool, he hoped. Even if she were at home, what good could that possibly do him? Just give him several bad nights, when he would lie in his corner of the tent and listen to the boys snoring with a different key for every man. Such nights were not pleasant, nor were the thoughts that caused them.

From where they were camped upon a ridge which bounded a broad coulee on the east, he could look down upon the Stevens ranch nestling in the bottomland, the house half hidden among the cottonwoods. Through the last hours of the afternoon he watched it hungrily. The big corral ran down to the water's edge, and he noted idly that three panels of the fence extended out into the river, and that the muddy water was creeping steadily up until at sundown the posts of the first panel barely showed above the water.

Park came up to him and looked down upon the little valley. "I never did see any sense in Jack Stevens building where he did," he remarked. "There ain't a June flood that don't put his corral under water, and some uh these days it's going to get the house. He was too lazy to dig a well back on high ground; he'd rather

take chances on having the whole business washed off the face uh the earth."

"There must be danger of it this year if ever," Thurston observed uneasily. "The river is coming up pretty fast, it seems to me. It must have raised three feet since we crossed this afternoon."

"Uh course there's danger, with all that snow coming out uh the mountains. And like as not Jack's in Shellanne roosting on somebody's pool table and telling it scarey, instead uh staying at home looking after his stuff. Where yuh going, Bud?"

"I'm going to ride down there," Thurston answered constrainedly. "The women may be all alone."

"Well, I'll go along, if you'll hold on a minute. Jack ain't got a lick uh sense —I don't care if he *is* Mona's brother."

"Half brother," corrected Thurston, as he swung up into the saddle. He had

a poor opinion of Jack and resented even that slight relation to Mona.

The road was soggy with the rain which fell steadily; down in the bottom, the low places in the road were already under water, and the river, widening almost perceptibly in its headlong rush down the narrow valley, crept inch by inch up its low banks. When they galloped into the yard which sloped from the house gently down to the river fifty yards away, Mona's face appeared for a moment in the window. Evidently she had been watching for some one, and Thurston's heart flopped in his chest as he wondered, fleetingly, if it could be himself. When she opened the door her eyes greeted him with a certain wistful expression that he had never seen in them before. He was guilty of wishing that Park had stayed in camp.

"Oh, I'm glad you rode over," she

welcomed—but she was careful, after that first swift glance, to look at Park. "Jack wasn't at camp, was he? He went to town this morning, and I looked for him back long before now. But it's a mistake ever to look for Jack until he's actually in sight."

Park smiled vaguely. He was afraid it would not be polite to agree with her as emphatically as he would like to have done. But Thurston had no smile ready, polite or otherwise. Instead he drew down his brows in a way not complimentary to Jack.

"Where is your mother?" he asked, almost peremptorily.

"Mamma went to Great Falls last week," she told him primly, just grazing him with one of her impersonal glances which nearly drove him to desperation. "Aunt Mary has typhoid fever—there seems to be so much of that this spring

—and they sent for mamma. She's such a splendid nurse, you know."

Thurston did know, but he passed over the subject. "And you're alone?" he demanded.

"Certainly not; aren't you two here?" Mona could be very pert when she tried. "Jack and I are holding down the ranch just now; the boys are all on roundup, of course. Jack went to town to-day—to see some one."

"Um-m—yes, of course." It was Park, still trying to be polite and not commit himself on the subject of Jack. The "some one" whom Jack went oftenest to see was the bartender in the Palace saloon, but it was not necessary to tell her that.

"The river's coming up pretty fast, Mona," he ventured. "Don't yuh think yuh ought to pull out and go visiting?"

"No, I don't." Mona's tone was very

decided. "I wouldn't drop down on a neighbor without warning just because the river happens to be coming up. It has 'come up' every June since we've been living here—and there have been several of them. At the worst it never came inside the gate."

"You can never tell what it might do," Park argued. "Yuh know yourself there's never been so much snow in the mountains. This hot weather we've been having lately, and then the rain, will bring it a-whooping. Can't yuh ride over to the Jonses? One of us'll go with yuh."

"No, I can't." Mona's chin went up perversely. "I'm no coward, I hope, even if there was any danger—which there isn't."

Thurston's chin went up also, and he sat a bit straighter. Whether she meant it or not, he took her words as a covert stab at himself. Probably she did not

mean it; at any rate the blood flew consciously to her cheeks after she had spoken, and she caught her under lip sharply between her teeth. And that did not help matters or make her temper more yielding.

"Anyway," she added hurriedly, "Jack will be here; he's likely to come any minute now."

"Uh course, if Jack's got some new kind of half-hitch he can put on the river and hold it back yuh'll be all right," fleered Park, with the freedom of an old friend. He had known Mona when she wore dresses to her shoe-tops and her hair in long, brown curls down her back.

She wrinkled her nose at him—also with the freedom of an old friend—and Thurston stirred restlessly in his chair. He did not like even Park to be too familiar with Mona, though he knew there was a girl in Shellanne whose name Park sometimes spoke in his sleep.

She lifted the big glass lamp down from its place on the clock-shelf and lighted it with fingers not quite steady. "You men," she remarked, "think women ought to be wrapped in pink cotton and put in a glass cabinet. If, by any miracle, the river *should* come up around the house, I flatter myself I should be able to cope with the situation. I'd just saddle my horse and ride out to high ground!"

"Would yuh?" Park grinned skeptically. "The road from here to the hill is half under water right now; the river's got over the bank above, and is flooding down through the horse pasture. By the time the water got up here the river'd be as wide and deep one side uh yuh as the other. Then where'd yuh be at?"

"It won't get up here, though," Mona asserted coolly. "It never has."

"No—and the Lazy Eight never had

to work the Yellowstone range on spring roundup before either," Park told her meaningly.

Whereupon Mona got upon her pedestal and smiled her unpleasant smile, against which even Park had no argument ready.

They lingered till long after all good cowpunchers are supposed to be in their beds—unless they are standing night-guard—but Jack failed to appear. The rain drummed upon the roof and the river swished and gurgled against the crumbling banks, and grumbled audibly to itself because the hills stood immovably in their places and set bounds which it could not pass, however much it might rage against their base.

When the clock struck a wheezy nine Mona glanced at it significantly and smothered a yawn more than half affected. It was a hint which no man with

an atom of self-respect could overlook. With mutual understanding the two rose.

"I guess we'll have to be going," Park said with some ceremony. "I kept thinking maybe Jack would show up; it ain't right to leave yuh here alone like this."

"I don't see why not; I'm not the least bit afraid," Mona said. Her tone was impersonal and had in it a note of dismissal.

So, there being nothing else that they could do, they said good-night and took themselves off.

"This is sure fierce," Park grumbled when they struck the lower ground. "Darn a man like Jack Stevens! He'll hang out there in town and bowl up on other men's money till plumb daylight. It's a wonder Mona didn't go with her mother. But no—it'd be awful if Jack had to cook his own grub for a week. Say, the water has come up a lot, don't yuh think, Bud? If it raises much more

Mona'll sure have a chance to 'cope with the situation.' It'd just about serve her right, too."

Thurston did not think so, but he was in too dispirited a mood to argue the point. It had not been good for his peace of mind to sit and watch the color come and go in Mona's cheeks, and the laughter spring unheralded into her dear, big eyes, and the light tangle itself in the waves of her hair.

He guided his horse carefully through the deep places, and noted uneasily how much deeper it was than when they had crossed before. He cursed the conventions which forbade his staying and watching over the girl back there in the house which already stood upon an island, cut off from the safe, high land by a strip of backwater that was widening and deepening every minute, and, when it rose high enough to flow into the river below,

would have a current that would make a nasty crossing.

On the first rise he stopped and looked back at the light which shone out from among the dripping cottonwoods. Even then he was tempted to go back and brave her anger that he might feel assured of her safety.

"Oh, come on," Park cried impatiently. "We can't do any good sitting out here in the rain. I don't suppose the water will get clear up to the house; it'll likely do things to the sheds and corrals, though—and serve Jack right. Come on, Bud. Mona won't have us around, so the sooner we get under cover the better for us. She's got lots uh nerve; I guess she'll make out all right."

There was common sense in the argument, and Thurston recognized it and rode on to camp. But instead of unsaddling, as he would naturally have

done, he tied Sunfish to the bed-wagon and threw his slicker over his back to protect him from the rain. And though Park said nothing, he followed Thurston's example.

CHAPTER XIII

"I'LL STAY—ALWAYS"

FOR a long time Thurston lay with wide-open eyes staring up at nothing, listening to the rain and thinking. By and by the rain ceased and he could tell by the dim whiteness of the tent roof that the clouds must have been swept away from before the moon, then just past the full.

He got up carefully so as not to disturb the others, and crept over two or three sleeping forms on his way to the opening, untied the flap and went out. The whole hilltop and the valley below were bathed in mellow radiance. He

studied critically the wide sweep of the river. He might almost have thought it the Missouri itself, it stretched so far from bank to bank; indeed, it seemed to know no banks but the hills themselves. He turned toward where the light had shone among the cottonwoods below; there was nothing but a great blot of shade that told him nothing.

A step sounded just behind. A hand —the hand of Park—rested upon his shoulder. "Looks kinda dubious, don't it, kid? Was yuh thinking about riding down there?"

"Yes," Thurston answered simply. "Are you coming?"

"Sure," Park assented.

They got upon their horses and headed down the trail to the Stevens place. Thurston would have put Sunfish to a run, but Park checked him.

"Go easy," he admonished. "If

there's swimming to be done—and it's a cinch there will be—he's going to need all the wind he's got."

Down the hill they stopped at the edge of a raging torrent and strained their eyes to see what lay on the other side. While they looked, a light twinkled out from among the tree-tops. Thurston caught his breath sharply.

"She's upstairs," he said, and his voice sounded strained and unnatural. "It's just a loft where they store stuff." He started to ride into the flood.

"Come on back here, yuh chump!" Park roared. "Get off and loosen the cinch before yuh go in there, or yuh won't get far. Sunfish 'll need room to breathe, once he gets to bucking that current. He's a good water horse—just give him his head and don't get rattled and interfere with him. And we've got to go up a ways before we start in."

He led the way upstream, skirting under the bluff, and Thurston, chafing against the delay, followed obediently. Trees were racing down, their clean-washed roots reaching up in a tangle from the water, their branches waving like imploring arms. A black, tar-papered shack went scudding past, lodged upon a ridge where the water was shallower, and sat there swaying drunkenly. Upon it a great yellow cat clung and yowled his fear.

"That's old Dutch Henry's house," Park shouted above the roar. "I'll bet he's cussing things blue on some pinnacle up there." He laughed at the picture his imagination conjured, and rode out into the swirl.

Thurston kept close behind, mindful of Park's command to give Sunfish his head. Sunfish had carried him safely out of the stampede and he had no fear of him now.

His chief thought was a wish that he might do this thing quite alone. He was jealous of Park's leading, and thought bitterly that Mona would thank Park alone and pass him by with scant praise—and he did so want to vindicate himself. The next minute he was cursing his damnable selfishness. A tree had swept down just before him, caught Park and his horse in its branches and hurried on as if ashamed of what it had done. Thurston, in that instant, came near jerking Sunfish around to follow; but he checked the impulse as it was formed and left the reins alone—which was wise. He could not have helped Park, and he could very easily have drowned himself. Though it was not thought of himself but of Mona that stayed his hand.

They landed at the gate. Sunfish scrambled with his feet for secure footing, found it and waded up to the front

door. The water was a foot deep on the porch. Thurston beat an imperative tattoo upon the door with the butt of his quirt, and shouted. And Mona's voice, shorn of its customary assurance, answered faintly from the loft.

He shouted again, giving directions in a tone of authority which must have sounded strange to her, but which she did not seem to resent and obeyed without protest. She had to wade from the stairs to the door and when Thurston stooped and lifted her up in front of him, she looked as if she were very glad to have him there.

"You didn't 'cope with the situation,' after all," he remarked while she was settling herself firmly in the saddle.

"I went to sleep and didn't notice the water till it was coming in at the door," she explained. "And then—" She stopped abruptly.

"Then what?" he demanded maliciously. "Were you afraid?"

"A—a little," she confessed reluctantly.

Thurston gloated over it in silence—until he remembered Park. After that he could think of little else. As before, so now Sunfish battled as seemed to him best, for Thurston, astride behind the saddle, held Mona somewhat tighter than he need to have done, and let the horse go.

So long as Sunfish had footing he braced himself against the mad rush of waters and forged ahead. But out where the current ran swimming deep he floundered desperately under his double burden. While his strength lasted he kept his head above water, struggling gamely against the flood that lapped over his back and bubbled in his nostrils. Thurston felt his laboring and clutched Mona still tighter. Of a sudden the horse's head

Thurston held Mona somewhat tighter than he need to have done. *Page 204*

went under; the black water came up around Thurston's throat with a hungry swish, and Sunfish went out from under him like an eel.

There was a confused roaring in his ears, a horrid sense of suffocation for a moment. But he had learned to swim when he was a boy at school, and he freed one hand from its grip on Mona and set to paddling with much vigor and considerably less skill. And though the undercurrent clutched him and the weight of Mona taxed his strength, he managed to keep them both afloat and to make a little headway until the deepest part lay behind them.

How thankful he was when his feet touched bottom, no one but himself ever knew! His ears hummed from the water in them, and the roar of the river was to him as the roar of the sea; his eyes smarted from the clammy touch of the

dingy froth that went hurrying by in monster flakes; his lungs ached and his heart pounded heavily against his ribs when he stopped, gasping, beyond reach of the water-devils that lapped viciously behind.

He stood a minute with his arm still around her, and coughed his voice clear. "Park went down—" he began, hardly knowing what it was he was saying. "Park—" He stopped, then shouted the name aloud. "Park! Oh-h, Park!"

And from somewhere down the river came a faint reassuring whoop.

"Thank the Lord!" gasped Thurston, and leaned against her for a second. Then he straightened. "Are you all right?" he asked, and drew her toward a rock near at hand—for in truth, the knees of him were shaking. They sat down, and he looked more closely at her face and discovered that it was wet with something

more than river water. Mona the self-assured, Mona the strong-hearted, was crying. And instinctively he knew that not the chill alone made her shiver. He was keeping his arm around her waist deliberately, and it pleased him that she let it stay. After a minute she did something which surprised him mightily—and pleased him more: She dropped her face down against the soaked lapels of his coat, and left it there. He laid a hand tenderly against her cheek and wondered if he dared feel so happy.

"Little girl—oh, little girl," he said softly, and stopped. For the crowding emotions in his heart and brain the English language has no words.

Mona lifted her face and looked into his eyes. Her own were soft and shining in the moonlight, and she was smiling a little—the roguish little smile of the imitation pastel portrait. "You—you'll un-

pack your typewriter, won't you please, and—and stay?"

Thurston crushed her close. "Stay? The range-land will never get rid of me now," he cried jubilantly. "Hank wanted to take me into the Lazy Eight, so now I'll buy an interest, and stay—*always*."

"You—dear!" Mona snuggled close and learned how it feels to be kissed, if she had never known before.

Sunfish, having scrambled ashore a few yards farther down, came up to them and stood waiting, as if to be forgiven for his failure to carry them safe to land. But Thurston, after the first inattentive glance, ungratefully took no heed of him.

There was a sound of scrambling footsteps and Park came dripping up to them. "Well, say!" he greeted. "Ain't yuh got anything to do but set here and—er—look at the moon? Break away and come

up to camp. I'll rout out the cook and make him boil us some coffee."

Thurston turned joyfully toward him. "Park, old fellow, I was afraid——"

"Yuh better reform and quit being afraid," Park bantered. "I got out uh the mix-up fine, but I guess my horse went on down—poor devil. I was poking around below there looking for him.

"Well, Mona, I see yuh was able to 'cope with the situation,' all right—but yuh needed Bud mighty bad, I reckon. The chances is yuh won't have no house in the morning, so Bud'll have to get busy and rustle one for yuh. I guess you'll own up, now, that the water *can* get through the gate." He laughed in his teasing way.

Mona stood up, and her shining eyes were turned to Thurston. "I don't care," she asserted with reddened cheeks. "I'm just glad it did get through."

" Same here," said Thurston with much emphasis.

Then, with Mona once more in the saddle, and with Thurston leading Sunfish by the bridle-rein, they trailed damply and happily up the long ridge to where the white tents of the roundup gleamed sharply against the sky-line.

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